

The Rig

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21943021) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21943021>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Thor (Movies)
Relationship:	Loki/Thor
Character:	Loki (Marvel) , Thor (Marvel)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Dystopia , Alternate Universe - Human , Hurt/Comfort , Bicurious!Thor , Loki has a tramp stamp :) , Angst , Psychological Horror , Author's Favorite
Stats:	Published: 2019-12-24 Completed: 2021-06-23 Chapters: 9/9 Words: 126664

The Rig

by [cunninglingus](#)

Summary

Life in the Compound is rough...but it's better than being sent to the Rig.

aka the one in which Thor is a mercenary and Loki is a sex worker.

Notes

I love loki whump, fight me. TW: violence, references to child abuse, suicide and past sexual/emotional abuse.

Apologies for errors, I am unbeta'd.

PREFACE:

Thor bolts awake. In bed. In the Compound.

“No,” he sobs.

Disorientated, he springs out of bed and rushes to his calendar in the kitchen. September, 1996. Jane's already been taken to the Rig. Thor has not yet escaped to find Loki. Thor is back where he started in the story, and yet not far back enough. He has to do it all again. He has to find a way out of here. He has to save Loki.

Despite how hard Thor tries to hold on to the memory, it disintegrates, like a rapidly fading dream. He can't remember, he can't remember.....

one of nine

Thor's toes are freezing he can't stop checking his watch: almost an hour and a half delay. He shuffles his weight from one foot to the other as he puffs on his cigarette. He knows they're on route, but there's no telling when they'll arrive - not in this weather. Thor hopes it's soon. The guys are tired, and cold. It's late, and slushy puddles are starting to form in the tarmac's potholes. There's only so much freezing rain their outerwear can repel before it soaks them to the bone. The only thing there is to distract them is the sound of the powerlines, which emit a buzzing noise in the humid air, like a swarm of insects.

Thor is fantasizing about the nice hot shower he'll take when the convoy finally crests the hill and comes into view. Everyone springs into action at once. Soldiers shout and get into position. The gates groan to life like an ancient behemoth as they rattle open. The metal-on-metal sound makes Thor's teeth ache.

The escort vans pull in first, then the truck. Grey jumps out of the passenger side.

"You're late," Thor tells him as he tosses his cigarette butt into a puddle.

"Roads are shit," Grey says, passing him a clipboard. Thor skims the list and compares it to his own. Forty seven. If none of them are dead.

"Should've checked the weather."

Grey just laughs. "Fuck you, Red."

Thor signals to the surrounding guys. "Get them out."

At Thor's order, the back door of the truck's trailer is unhatched and the cargo is unloaded. Out come forty seven wide eyed, dirty faces, shivering, huddled together, and blinking under the tarmac floodlights. The soldiers are yelling at them to get in line in ascending order. This takes longer than it should; the conscripts are wobbly on their feet, disorientated from the long drive. They never look like much when they arrive, smelling like piss and stale body odor. Some of them aren't even worth the cost to ship them here, in Thor's opinion. The sickly ones won't last a year.

Once they're in place Thor makes his way towards the start of the line, clipboard in hand. The

sooner processing is done the sooner he can make his report and then have that shower he's been craving. Thor hardly bothers looking up except to verify their identities.

2735-21714: Female, mid-thirties. White. He checks her off.

2735-21722: Male, 45. Asian, a draughtsman.

2735-21734: Male, 26, Mixed, Laborer.

One by one, Thor goes down the line. He's done this so many times before it's become routine. Thor doesn't even think most of the time. It's best not to.

2735-21774: Male. 21. White -

Thor stops. Its Loki, Thor thinks. Or it could be. It's hard to say. He's got that same kind of pointy face. But it's been so long, Thor's memory of him is vague.

Maybe-Loki is trembling so hard his teeth chatter. His breath is coming out in rapid cloudy pants. His arms are wrapped around his slim frame, clutching his threadbare knit green sweater, which is quickly starting to soak through with freezing rain.

No, it's definitely Loki, because when the conscript glances up his lips part in astonishment and his eyes go wide. Those strange, uniquely-coloured, unmistakable eyes. Green, like sea glass. He's recognized Thor in return.

Loki opens his mouth like he's about to say something but Thor shoots him a dark look paired with the slightest head shake. *You don't know me.* Loki wisely gets the message and snaps his mouth shut, though his eyes don't lose their rounded, bewildered quality.

Thor checks him off as he would any other conscript and continues moving down the line, the way he always does. For the first time in a long time, Thor feels uneasy.

Getting a conscript alone isn't difficult, especially for someone in Thor's position. All Black cares about is that they aren't banged up too much and that they're returned to the holding pens in due course. Thor is not in the habit of exploiting this perk, and as such, he tries to be discreet. Thor is not looking to be made a target of the Compound's rampant gossip machine.

Loki is brought into the office by an underling of Thor's, whom Thor casually dismisses with a flick of his hand. As soon as the door closes behind him, Loki careens into Thor's arms, knocking the breath out of him.

"Thor, Thor...."

Thor feels the wetness from Loki's eyes on his neck. He smells filthy, and his hair sheens with grease. He'd been in that truck for a few days.

At Thor's cold reception, Loki pulls away. His excitement dims until it no longer reaches his eyes. He looks unsure. Unsure and desperate.

"I'm so happy to see you," Loki says, hazarding a smile. His voice is lower than Thor remembers - no longer a little kid's voice. "I.....I'd hoped I would see you again one day."

Whether he says this because he means it, or because he thinks it's what Thor would want to hear, Thor can't tell. Probably the latter. They didn't even know each other that well, back then. Certainly not enough for Loki to have missed him when he left.

"We hadn't heard from you in years," Loki goes on. "We thought you were dead."

"Yeah, probably." Thor says.

Loki smiles again, supplicating. "But here you are. Mr. Toughguy, huh? You look...good."

"You look like shit."

“Yeah, I know. I stink. But I clean up nice.” Loki laughs nervously and smooths back his frizzy hair. “Look, uh. I know you must not really remember me much. And I know you have no reason to, but I was really, *really* hoping you’d help me. Maybe, uh, have me diverted, somehow?”

His eyes are so big and wet. It's been a long time since Thor has been moved by a concript's tears. Thor wants to tell him to shut the fuck up.

But instead he says, “I can’t.”

“You’re a Commander, right? Surely you must have some say-” At this, Thor’s face darkens, and Loki stops short. When he resumes it’s in a much smaller, squeaky voice: “Or just put a word in for me? I could labor, or...or whatever. Please. I just don’t want to be sent to the Rig.”

“I’m not in charge of that.”

Loki seems to have not heard him. “Please.” he whispers it like a chant. His fingers clutch at Thor’s jacket, what little he can grab that isn’t kevlar armour. “Please, Thor. Brother....”

"Don't call me that," Thor snarls, shoving him off. "We aren't that. We never were. No one can know I knew you before."

Loki staggers on his feet. His tears spill over and he finally starts to cry.

"Why get me alone then?" Loki demands, his voice hitching. "What do you want with me?"

"I want to know if Odin is dead."

"Yeah," Loki spits. "Yeah, he's dead."

It's as Thor suspected. "When?"

At first Loki looks like he isn’t going to answer. Then he wipes his face on his sleeve and says, "Couple of years after you left. Had a stroke and lost the ability to move his left side. My mom -

she stayed with him until the day he died. Nursed him. Cleaned up his *shit*. And in the end he didn't have a penny to leave us."

Thor mulls this over, and finds that he feels nothing. His formidable, indomitable father, reduced to a vegetable. Thor would rather take a bullet to the brain - which, lucky him, isn't out of the question.

"Please, I'm begging you," Loki says. "I'm literally begging you. Help me."

Thor does feel bad for him. Uncertainly, he says, "I don't know if I can."

Loki must sense how honest this answer is, because he crumples into himself. The look of abject hopelessness is one Thor's seen a lot of, although it never really gets any easier.

And maybe in this conscript Thor sees the kid he once knew, because before he can think better of it, he exhales through his nose and says, "I'll see what I can do."

Thor wipes his clammy hands on his fatigues before he knocks on the office door. The *clunk clunk clunk* sound resounds down his arm and into his skull.

"What?" comes the voice from inside.

"It's me, sir," Thor says into the door.

"Red?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, yeah. Come in."

Thor opens the door. Black is at his desk with his nose scrunched up like he'd just taken a hit of snuff. He greets Thor with an oily grin.

"Red."

Thor closes the door behind him. "Thank you for seeing me, sir."

Black tucks his snuff tin back into his desk drawer. "If this is about the next job I told you I don't know when it'll pull through. You're still on standby until further notice."

Thor feels his neck heat under his collar. "Uh, no sir. Nothing like that. It's, ah. More of a personal matter."

Black leans forward in his chair, suddenly keen. "*Personal.*"

"Yeah." Thor says, and clears his throat. Best not to beat around the bush: "I wanted to talk to you about getting a boy."

Black's eyebrows raise. "A boy? For you?" He appears to find that rather funny. "Didn't take you as the type."

"For a change of pace," Thor says dryly.

At that, Black laughs outright. "Boy, girl, it's about time you got on. I was starting to get worried about you. You've been such a gloom cloud, lately. It's been what, six months?"

"Four," Thor manages.

"Time flies, huh." Black selects a manila folder on his desk from one of the many piles. "A boy. Aren't you just full of surprises. Looks like you picked the right day to ask me. As I recall, I got a sixteen year old and a fourteen year old coming next shipment. I could hold them for you. You can take your pick."

Thor fights the urge to wrinkle his nose. “No, I...uh. Prefer them older. The black-haired one from Thursday. 21774.”

Black hums thoughtfully and rolls his chair over to his filing cabinet. “Thursday.” He pulls up the file and thumbs through it. “The twenty-one year old?”

“Yeah.”

Black’s dark eyes glimmer. “The one you sampled?”

Thor feels his face heat even more. He didn't think Black would find out about that. Then again, Black seems to know everything that goes on in the Compound.

Black goes on, “He’s a little old, dontcha think? Boys are easier to handle when they’re young. You sure you don’t want to wait for the next shipment?”

“I need someone who can work. Not some half starved runt who’ll drop dead in a year.”

Black hums absently as he scans the file in front of him. “Unfortunately, it looks like 21774 is currently unavailable. He’s already been assigned duty on the Rig.”

Black tosses the file on the desk in front of him, his face set in a smarmy grin. Thor feels all the worse for Loki.

“Tell you what. Twelve years on your contract and you can have your...’change of pace’.”

Thor feels his heart stop. *Twelve years?* Thor does the mental math. Loki isn’t worth twelve years, even as a sex worker. Black is doing this to keep Thor indentured, to keep his most loyal dog at heel. No wonder he’s thrilled.

“Could you -” Thor doesn’t know how to phrase it delicately. “Could you maybe deduct from my years owed on Jane? She died so young -”

“That’s not my fault. Who got her pregnant, anyway? Listen, Red. I get it. A man like you needs a bit of comfort at night. I can sympathize. But conscripts are needed desperately on the Rig. If you want one for yourself you gotta make it worth my while. Twelve.”

“Ten.”

“Twelve, you sonofabitch,” Black laughs. “And for anyone else it would be fifteen. I like you, Red. Don’t piss me off.”

Thor’s shoulders drop. He closes his eyes slowly. “Twelve,” he says at last.

Thor makes his way down to the holding pens, where the conscripts are detained until it’s time to take them down to the harbour. Loki isn’t hard to spot. He’s huddled underneath a blanket with some older woman.

“21774.”

Loki’s face when he looks up and sees Thor is one of almost astronomical gratitude. Thor shuts that down with a stony glare. He might not be so glad, in just a minute.

Loki is waved forwards through the opened gate. The other soldiers on duty are watching the proceedings with interest. Out of the corner of his eye Thor can see the guys on the catwalk above, ribbing each other to pay attention to the goings-on: *Red's getting a boy!*

“What’s your name?” Thor barks, right into Loki’s face. Loki stares back at him, startled, so Thor is forced to add: “Don’t look me in the eye! Answer.”

Loki quickly averts his gaze. “My birth name is Loki, sir.”

“Loki,” Thor repeats, a sneer. “I’m Commander of the Red unit, but you’ll address me as sir. You belong to me now and you’ll do as I say.” He pauses to allow his voice to echo. He needs to get the message across, and not just to Loki. “Is that clear?”

Loki doesn't answer right away so Thor does something he knows he'll regret later: slaps Loki across the face.

"Is that clear?"

Loki blinks a few times, dazed. "Yes, sir. Crystal clear."

Thor gestures with his fingers. "Follow me."

Thor storms out into the Compound yard without bothering to look back. Better that than suffer the hooting from the other soldiers. Behind him, Loki trots at his heels like a puppy. Thor doesn't stop to wait for him to catch up.

All he can think is, *I've got twelve more years in this shithole, because of you.*

Loki touches his arm. "Thank you."

He looks like a quivering little weasel, he's so cold. He'll need a coat, socks, boots. That means extra credits. Credits Thor doesn't have. Credits Thor could be using on cigarettes and extra rations of pork.

Then again, Loki's so scrawny maybe some of Jane's stuff would fit him. Not her boots, but maybe the coat...

"I'm sorry I hit you," Thor mutters, and pulls out a cigarette.

He leads Loki to a little cluster of cabins on the opposite side of the Compound, near the fence. Thor digs in his pocket for his keys and unlocks the front door of the second last cabin at the end.

“Home sweet home,” Thor says caustically, and flicks the light switch on.

Thor angles his body in the doorway to allow Loki entry. Loki steps inside and looks around as Thor closes and locks the door behind them. Thor watches as Loki’s gratitude begins to wither at the reality of their shared living conditions: dirty dishes in the sink, unswept linoleum floor. Dust on the windowsills, particle board cupboards, bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

"This is where you live?"

Loki’s reaction both angers and embarrasses him. Thor certainly hasn’t kept the place as tidy as Jane had, and even at the best of times it’s still a dumpy shack, but it’s better than sleeping with a hundred guys in the barracks. And it has amenities: gas stove, sink, and icebox, private bathroom and shower. In the kitchen window there’s a view of the sea through the Compound’s chainlink fence. It’s not much but Thor worked hard for it, and he’s glad to have it.

Thor pins him under a challenging glare. “Is there a problem?”

Loki shakes his head no.

“Yeah, I thought not. Now, let me give you the *grand tour*.” Thor points: “Through there is the bathroom. That door is the bedroom. And the ladder there leads to the cellar. And this,” He waves his hand around the kitchen area theatrically, “This is where I *entertain*.”

Loki peers around. It’s as if he’s afraid to move or touch anything. He looks out of place, like an alien from another planet.

What the hell is Thor doing? Thor hardly remembers Loki at all. He can’t remember Loki as having any personality traits at all, aside from maybe *quiet* and *watchful*, if those count.

And now Thor’s stuck with him.

“You can sit,” Thor says, gesturing to his folding table and mismatched chairs.

Loki does, stiffly.

“Ration stamps are given out at the beginning of the month. I will give you the week’s stamps and you will collect our allotment from the commissary. Soap, cabbage, coffee, potatoes, that sort of thing. You’ll work at the laundry for extra credits. I’ll escort you there tomorrow morning so you know where it is.”

“Sure,” Loki says.

“I expect you to keep house, and when I’m home you’ll prepare meals.”

“I don’t know how to cook, sir.”

Thor selects a beat-up, yellowed magazine from on top of the ice box. They were in the shack when Thor moved in. He tosses it on the table in front of Loki, and it lands with a dull thunk. “Learn.”

Loki looks down at it expressionlessly. He doesn't have to say a single word. Thor knows at once Loki can't read.

Thor sighs and snatches the magazine away.

“Never mind. It’s not like we can get most of those ingredients anyway. Just fry shit in bacon fat, I’ll probably eat it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Thor echoes, equally uncertain. “Well, you’ll need a change of clothes I guess. And a shower. You stink worse than death.”

“I’m sorry,” Loki says, and he looks like he means it.

“It’s - whatever.” Thor sighs. “Wait here.” He descends into the cellar and crouches down to retrieve the cardboard box he’d stowed underneath the ladder. Something in his chest twists even to look at it. He takes it in hand and hauls it back upstairs.

“Here,” Thor says, setting the box down on the floor in front of Loki. “Some of this stuff might fit you.”

Loki opens the box’s flaps and begins rummaging through the mildewy, damp-smelling contents. He pulls out a floral t-shirt with that says *Waikiki Beach* in a faded loopy script.

“Whose were these?”

“My wife before you,” Thor says flatly.

Loki stares at him for a minute with those strange eyes. “So I’m, like, her replacement?”

“As a matter of fact, yeah,” Thor snaps, losing patience. “Didn’t your junkie mom teach you anything about being kept? You live in my house, you use my rations, that makes you my wife. Like it or not, this is all I got. This is what *you begged me for*, remember? Or if you prefer, you can go be some Rig Pig’s bitch, I really don’t care.”

Loki just sits there and absorbs this passively with wide glossy eyes. All at once Thor misses Jane, who would’ve pushed back a little.

Thor exhales. “Look. I’m not going to beat on you. Okay? Relax.” Loki regards him dully and Thor appends: “I only did that to prove a point. I have a reputation to maintain. I’m not known to be into...boys.”

“And you have to show you’re the man. I get it.”

Thor is taken aback by both Loki’s bluntness and his apt observation. “Er, yeah. I’m not trying to be a dick but that’s just how it is here. You cannot be seen disrespecting me. *Especially* because you’re a boy.”

Loki smiles wanly. “I get it. It’s okay.”

“Okay,” Thor repeats, and clears his throat. He already needs another cigarette. “Well, anyway. Anything in here that you like is yours. I know it’s a little dank. It just needs a wash and it’ll freshen right up. Like you, right?”

Loki remains expressionless.

“Right,” Thor answers himself.

They scrounge and manage to find a few T-shirts that look like they’ll fit and a pair of drawstring sweatpants, extra large, that Thor had bought Jane in her third trimester.

Next, Thor hustles Loki into the shower and hands him a worn towel.

"The hot water runs out in about three minutes so I wouldn't linger."

“Thanks,” says Loki.

Loki stays in the shower long after the hot water should have run out. Meanwhile, Thor lays in his ironwrought bed staring at the ceiling. He thinks he hears Loki crying in there.

When Loki emerges his hair is wet and he’s wearing Jane’s old maternity sweatpants, too short on him, and one of Thor’s sweaters. His face is puffy but he sure smells a hell of a lot better. Loki can cry all he likes, it doesn't change shit.

“I shouldn't have given you the impression I'm ungrateful," Loki says. "I'm very glad to be here."

“Sure,” says Thor with a sigh. He has no doubt that that's true.

“Do I...” Loki’s voice trails off. He tugs at his overlong sleeves. “Sleep here with you?”

“No, take the guest bedroom,” Thor says with an insouciant wave of his hand. Loki does not react at all so Thor feels compelled to add: “Of course with me.”

Loki continues to loom in the doorway. "Do you want a blowjob or something? I give pretty good head."

Thor is surprised, not just at the offer, but at how much he likes that idea. It's been awhile since Thor's had any kind of sexual contact. A mouth's a mouth, and Loki's kind of girly-looking if Thor squints. It's no secret what Loki is. Thor might as well get something out of this, for the twelve years he'll be paying for it.

"Actually, yeah...."

"Okay," Loki says, though his shoulders slump. He exhales audibly. "Okay."

Loki pads over and climbs into bed. Getting right down to business, he pulls Thor's dick out from his sweatpants, then spits into his hand and gives it a few warm-up strokes. Just the feeling of someone else's hands on his dick is enough to get Thor semi-erect - even if that someone is Loki. Thor closes his eyes. It's better to just feel and not watch.

Loki jerks him a few more times before going right for it, taking Thor deep into his mouth, and even into the back of his throat. Thor audibly groans. Loki isn't wrong: he's good. Arguably, it's the best head Thor has ever received. It's certainly the most enthusiastic. Jane never tried that hard at it. She would rather just lie there and let Thor fuck her.

Loki swirls his tongue over the head of Thor's cock, then takes him deep again, with one hand on the base of Thor's cock and the other hand massaging his balls. It's sloppy in the best way. Thor's entire cock is coated with spit, dripping down his balls. The sounds Loki is making are just as filthy. It's as if Loki loves nothing more than gagging himself on dick.

Loki doesn't make a fuss when Thor comes without any warning. In fairness, Thor himself is taken by surprise; it's frankly embarrassing how quickly it hits him. He didn't realize he had such a hair trigger. A testament to Loki's skill, he supposes, or Thor's prolonged dry spell. Loki swallows his load before Thor even thinks to stop him. Thor is too dazed to do anything but lie there bonelessly.

Afterwards, Loki mops off his mouth with his sleeve and tucks Thor's spent cock back in his sweatpants. He climbs under the covers next to Thor and positions himself right on the edge of the mattress, clearly trying to maintain a respectful distance, but the bed isn't very big and Thor already takes up most of it. There's no way to lie down without brushing up against each other. Loki's body is intimately warm next to Thor's, and impossible to ignore. The fog of orgasm is starting to wear off, and Thor's brain is coming back online. He just had Loki suck him off. Loki - a guy. That... *kid*

“I’m sorry about what I said about your mom,” Thor says. “She was a nice lady.”

Thor remembers Loki’s mom as a bit of a pillhead but sweet, eager to please. Thor’s father had taken her in and seemed to have liked her well enough. Thor can still picture the wide-eyed, wary kid she’d brought with her: Loki. They lived with them for years but Thor never saw Loki as anything other than the mousy son of the woman his dad was fucking.

“Yeah,” Loki says in the darkness. His voice is hoarse. “She was.”

In the morning Thor wakes and realizes there’s someone in bed with him. For a second he thinks it’s Jane and his heart begins to race. Then he sees that mop of slept-on black hair and it all comes back to him.

Twelve fucking years.

Thor sits up and shoves Loki on the shoulder.

“Wake up.”

Loki jerks awake with a start and immediately tenses up. He only somewhat unfurls when he sees who it is. Clearly he’s as disorientated by this as Thor is.

“Time for breakfast.”

Thor shows him how to work the stove and how to prepare his coffee. Thor has a half ration of bacon left which Thor fries with a few bread slices, deciding that he doesn’t care that he won’t have any for the following day. His bread was going stale anyway and needed to be used up. Thor saves the remaining bacon fat in a jar, careful not to waste.

Loki seems surprised when Thor plates him up with three strips of bacon, the same amount as Thor

had given himself. Loki looks like he could use the extra calories. He can't have been fed well during transport.

Thor hadn't really counted on having to split his breakfast with a second person, so his portion is comparatively lacking. He inhales his food while Loki merely nibbles at his. Loki leaves the last strip of bacon untouched, as if he somehow knows Thor is still hungry. It's torture to see it sitting on Loki's plate, tantalizing, within reach.

"Just eat it Loki, Christ," Thor says, and Loki does, slowly.

To distract himself from his unsatisfied belly, Thor takes a gulp of coffee. He's rewarded with a searing hot pain in his jaw. Thor winces and inhales sharply.

Loki looks up from his plate. "You okay?"

"My teeth," Thor says, holding his cheek. "I got a few rotten ones. Sometimes they hurt, is all." He downs the rest of his coffee and tries to ignore the continuing throb of pain.

Afterwards, Thor has Loki pile the dishes in the sink: that'll be his job for later. Next Thor bundles Loki up in Jane's old jacket. It fits him, albeit snugly in the shoulders.

"Here's a key to the house. You'll probably get back before I do. One last thing-" Thor opens a nearby drawer and pulls out a red ribbon. He holds it in front of Loki's face. "This is important, and I need you to listen to me very carefully. Don't go outside without tying this on you, somewhere visible."

Thor loops it around his upper arm and ties it in a small bow. Loki allows this complacently. He's deduced what it's for.

"Thank you," says Loki quietly, after Thor has finished.

"Let's go."

Thor drops Loki off at the laundry at around seven, when dawn is only barely starting to break. It's sharply cold but the sky is beautiful, shades of orange, pink and purple. The other laundry workers are already milling about. It's warm and humid in there, the constant chugging noise of the industrial machines rhythmic. It smells downy, like laundry soap. Thor always used to like that smell, but now it just reminds him of Jane.

"Commander," a portly woman greets. It's the laundry's overseer, Mrs. Beaton.

Thor nods. "Willa, this is Loki. He's here to start picking up shifts."

"Ma'am," says Loki.

"Lord knows we can use extra hands..." Mrs. Beaton glares at him through her glasses. "Have you ever worked in a laundry, boy?"

"No, ma'am."

"He'll learn," Thor assures her. "He's a good worker. Twenty still the going daily rate?"

"That is so, Commander," she says.

Thor turns to Loki. "Can you find your way back to the house from here?"

Loki nods.

"Good. See you tonight then. Good day, Mrs. Beaton."

Thor returns to his shack that night and finds it cold and dark. Thor is alarmed at first, thinking something happened to Loki on the way home, until he notices Jane's - *Loki's* - coat on the wall hook.

There aren't many places he could be, and Thor quickly finds Loki passed out on the bed. Thor flicks the light on and Loki jerks awake.

"Thor," he croaks, rubbing his eyes. "You're home."

"Where is dinner. Why are the dishes not done."

Loki looks startled. "I - I meant to, but I just had to lay down and rest my eyes a minute. I must have passed out. I'm sorry." Loki hobbles to his feet. "I'll do it now."

Thor has to grant that he's got some hustle. And although Thor is irritated at being made to wait, he suspects Loki is probably still a little sleep-deprived from the truck ride in. Thor goes to light a cigarette to tide himself over.

Loki turns around from the kitchen cabinets where he's pulling out pans. His face is hesitant. "Uh _"

"What."

"I have asthma," Loki tells him.

"You do?" Thor says, as he suddenly remembers kid-Loki using an inhaler like a little wiener. Thor closes his eyes and sighs. "You do. You got meds for it or something?"

Loki shakes his head no. He'd come with nothing but the clothes on his back.

"We can get you a puffer, I think, from the dispensary."

"Will it cost?"

“Everything costs, Loki,” Thor says testily.

“I’m sorry-”

“Yeah, yeah. I can smoke outside.”

Dinner is what it is. Potatoes, cabbage and onions fried in the morning's bacon fat. The potatoes are dry and underdone, making it hard for Thor to chew, and the whole thing could use a more liberal helping of salt, but it's not inedible. Thor can tell Loki rushed so as not to keep him waiting. Thor's so hungry by the time it's ready he'd eat the canteen's food. They don't talk at all through supper.

When Thor is done Loki dutifully clears his plate. Thor is in a better mood after having eaten, enough to initiate conversation.

“How was the laundry?”

“Fine,” Loki answers pleasantly. He sort of smiles. “My feet hurt a bit from standing all day but I’m sure I’ll get used to it. I kind of like it. It’s warm in there.”

Thor gets the impression that he's overcompensating, trying to be extra amiable to not further provoke Thor's temper.

"Shoes probably don't help." Thor muses, eyeing the battered footwear Loki had come in with. He'll need new ones for sure, preferably boots, if he's to keep his toes from freezing off. “If you can make those last out the week I’ll get you new ones. I’ll make sure you get a puffer too.”

Loki rests his hand on Thor's forearm.

“Thank you,” he says.

“Yeah,” Thor says, distracted.

Loki doesn't move his hand. His grip is strangely insistent.

“Thank you,” he says again, enunciating slowly and clearly, while staring at Thor with those unnerving, strangely-coloured eyes.

“You’re welcome.”

That night, Loki sucks his dick so hard Thor thinks he transcends to the next dimension.

“Goddamn,” Thor sighs, as Loki wipes his mouth. “You *are* good at that.”

Loki says nothing. He settles in bed under the covers next to Thor. Thor yelps as something icy brushes against his shin.

“Fuck! Is that your foot?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Jesus, they’re like ice cubes. You’re freezing. Why don’t you wear your socks?”

“I need to let them dry out for tomorrow,” says Loki. It’s true he only has one pair at the moment.

“You’re gonna fall off the bed. Come closer. We might as well warm each other up.”

Loki scoots towards him until his shoulder presses against Thor’s. They lay side-by-side like that for a few quiet moments.

“You can put your feet on me if you want,” Thor offers, since that’s what Jane used to do. Loki does, tentatively, and Thor hisses at the skin-to-skin contact. Christ, he’s cold. Thor laughs awkwardly at the situation. It’s so strange to cuddle with someone Thor barely knows. Not just someone - another man. *Loki*.

Thor feels the need to explain: “I’ll turn the heater on when it gets really cold. I’ve been trying to save propane. They start including it in our rations at the end of November.”

“Okay,” comes the reply.

“You’re going to be wishing for this in the summer,” Thor jokes, lamely. “It gets hot as Satan’s balls in here.”

Loki doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t say anything. Once again, Thor is embarrassed about his living conditions. He’d felt this way before, when he first got Jane, although she’d been more vocal in her contempt. Thor doesn’t know where Loki has been in the last twelve years, but he can’t imagine it was anywhere as rustic as this.

“But the spring isn’t bad,” Thor goes on. “Only, the yard gets a little muddy. One day I might get promoted to Captain, and that means off-Compound housing. I’d have a garden to grow vegetables, and God, maybe even a bathtub. But I gotta put in a few more years onsite first, pay my dues.”

Again, silence.

“Could you say something?” Thor asks.

“Hm?” Loki’s voice is dreamy, faraway.

“Say something.”

“About what?”

“Anything. You’re so quiet,” Thor comments, as if Loki hadn’t been the exact same as a little kid. Sourly he says, “You can tell me if you hate it here.”

“I don’t hate it here.”

It sounds like such a blatant lie. Thor scowls. “Because the alternative is worse. Got it.”

Loki turns to him. “Really I don’t.”

“I can hear you crying in the shower.”

Loki chews on his lip. He looks back at the ceiling. “Sorry. I’ll try not to.”

“Jesus Loki, you can cry if you want to! I don’t care,” Thor says, then grimaces at himself. “I mean - I do *care*, but I’m not gonna hold it against you. This place fucking sucks.”

Thor hoped this might elicit a little smile, but Loki’s face is an expressionless mask.

“It’s not being here...exactly,” he says at last, still staring at the ceiling. “Sometimes I miss my mom, is all.”

"Oh," says Thor, dumbly. “Did you get ...separated?”

“No. She died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Thor says, although secretly he’s relieved that she didn’t get processed and sent to the Rig. That would be worse.

“It was years ago,” Loki says, rubbing his eyes with the palm of his hand. “You’d think I’d be over it by now.”

He sounds so *sad*. Thor remembers them as being close.

“I still think about your mom’s meatloaf,” Thor offers, because he doesn’t know what else to say. “She always gave me the butt with the crusty bits. God. I can taste it if I think about it hard enough. Slathered in ketchup. I even loved it when it was burnt. Actually, I think I loved it *especially* when it was a little burnt. The inside was so moist. I wish I knew what she put in it. I think my teenage growth spurt was fuelled by meatloaf. She used to make me a whole sheet pan of fries to go with it,

and I ate it all. With more ketchup.”

Loki sniffles. Then he sobs quietly in the darkness. He's crying again. Thor has made him cry.

Thor sighs. They don't talk any more, after that.

In the morning Thor wakes to find himself pressed up against Loki with an erection. Thor takes care of himself in the shower.

Breakfast is oatmeal, Thor's least favourite, made with powdered milk. There's plenty of coffee, at least, although the heat of it hurts his teeth.

“Do you mind if I ask,” Loki says quietly, “Why you don't get them fixed if they're hurting you so bad?”

“Oh, sure. With all the credits I am clearly rolling in. I'll get them whitened too, while I'm at it.”

"I just thought... You being a Commander and all..."

Thor bursts out laughing. "That this job comes with good benefits? Dental? Pft. Maybe if my teeth abscess they'll spring to fix 'em for me. So I don't *die* before I complete my owed years of service." Thor mashes his oatmeal around in his bowl sullenly. It makes an unappetizing squelching noise. "I'll just have to bite the bullet one day and get 'em pulled."

An unpleasant thought crosses Thor's mind: once he gets his teeth pulled, he'll be eating a lot of this kind of formless slop.

"How many years you got?" Loki asks.

A few days ago it had been seventeen, Thor thinks. And now it's twenty nine.

Thor flashes Loki his best debonair grin.

"Enough that a few missing teeth will be the least of my problems."

At the end of the week Loki presents Thor with his laundry earnings: a note for sixty credits.

Thor takes it in hand. "It should be one-twenty."

"Mrs Beaton says I'm not worth full pay while I'm still learning."

Thor growls. *That fat cunt.*

"I'm sorry-"

"Don't," says Thor, irritated. So much for another couple packs of cigarettes and sausage links for the week. He hands the credit note back to Loki. "Take this, go to the goods store and get a pair of boots, warm ones, like I told you. And a new toothbrush. You don't want to wind up like me, yeah?"

Loki does, and returns the following night with his haul. The boots are not flashy but at least they look like they fit him and don't have any visible holes.

"They're much better. Thank you for letting me get them."

"Sure," Thor sighs.

Loki chews his lip. "The clerk there said I was short, I still owe forty credits. But he let me take them after I told him whose ...uh, whose wife I was."

Thor has to laugh at the absurdity of it. He simply *cannot* catch a break.

“See? Being stuck with me has its perks after all.” Thor jostles Loki’s shoulder. “You can laugh, Loki. This is funny. Of *course* you still owe credits. Of fucking course. I swear, this place works against you at every turn. You scrape by off crumbs they throw you. It’s just enough to survive, just enough to keep you complacent. But every day, it bleeds you out a little more.”

“I’m sorry- ”

Thor waves him off with an annoyed shrug. “It’s - whatever. Forty credits. We’ll make it back.”

Loki shakes his head. “I’m sorry that it’s been like this for you.” There’s a look of genuine compassion in his eyes - even pity. Pity! From a conscript. A sex worker.

Thor doesn’t know what to make of that.

In the following weeks, Loki’s income starts to roll in. One hundred and twenty extra credits per week from the laundry is not nothing, and Thor is grateful to have it. With it Thor gets Loki socks, underwear, a few pairs of pants. Having extra credits also means Thor can afford some variety in his diet: beef instead of pork. Vegetables other than carrots, cabbage and onions. Canned tomatoes, mandarin oranges, spaghetti, cheddar cheese.

He also gets Loki a puffer: sixty credits every month. That means smoking outside again, which Thor had done for the duration of Jane’s pregnancy. It’s no less of a pain now as it was then, but Thor recognizes it’s necessary both for Loki’s health and so that won’t go through puffers as fast.

It’s strange having Loki around all the time. Strange, too, to hear himself being referred to by his real name. They don’t talk much. Thor doesn’t know what to say to him, and he gets the sense Loki feels the same. Thor is having trouble wrapping his head around the idea of possibly having to live out the rest of his life with him. Thor isn’t sure Loki comprehends the permanency of their situation, and Thor elects not to enlighten him.

Regardless, Loki is doing his best to adapt to Compound life. He's not as good a cook as his mother was, but he does try, and he seems keen to learn. He is, however, a whiz at cleaning. Their shack is cleaner than it's ever been. It is kind of nice to have some company at home again, even if they so rarely speak. Thor hadn't realized just how lonely he'd been since Jane died.

And, okay. Loki *is* good at giving head. Thor is not a good man, not good enough to refuse when Loki deftly pulls out his cock and takes him down his throat. There's a niggling worm of guilt that always settles in his brain once he's come, yet he still allows Loki to suck him off, night after night. Loki does it with neither prompting nor complaint. Like just any other chore, probably. Thor tries not to think about it too much.

One evening after supper, Loki is putting dishes away. He's reaching up to the highest shelf. Jane's shirt is too short on him and rides up. Thor notices a dark mark on the sliver of skin just above the line of his jeans.

"What's that?"

Loki turns around. "What's what."

"On your lower back. A tattoo?"

"Oh. Yeah. My tramp stamp."

At first Thor sort of laughs, but then he sees Loki didn't intend for that to be funny.

"...Can I see it?"

Loki frowns, but obediently turns around and lifts up the hem of his shirt. It's a vaguely tribal looking tattoo, with a few stylized flowers. Thor touches it, and Loki's skin prickles with goosebumps. The skin there is soft, milky white, and warm to the touch.

"It's not badly done. It's kind of nice."

"It's tacky and I hate it." Loki tugs his shirt back down. "It makes me feel like *trash*."

He says that word so vehemently, with so much bitterness, that Thor is taken aback. It's not a tone Thor's ever heard him use before.

"I got lotsa ugly tattoos," Thor offers. Before Loki can answer he pulls his own shirt off. Despite having lived together for a few weeks, neither had seen the other shirtless. Their trysts in bed have always been done in the dark with several layers of clothing to stave off the cold.

Loki's face is comically bewildered as he takes in the sight. "Why'd you get these?"

"To look tough," Thor says honestly.

"That'll do it," Loki says with a little smile. His eyes roam across Thor's chest. "Some of these are really terrible."

"Right?" Thor points to his upper arm. "This pin up has a fucky face. The shadow makes her look like she's got a 'stache or something. And this one, I might get covered. Even just to black it out would be better. And of course you've seen these." Thor holds his fists together to best display his HOLD FAST knuckle tattoos. "Real original, huh."

Loki's gaze is elsewhere: on a tattoo across Thor's hipbone. J-A-N-E in a cursive script.

He looks at Thor. "Was she -"

"My wife, yeah." Thor says, embarrassed. He thought, naively, if he got her name tattooed she'd realize just how seriously Thor took their relationship - that maybe she'd change her mind about him. But she never did. She never truly thought of him as anything other than as one of the soldiers complicit in her captivity.

Loki cocks an eyebrow. "I guess you gotta get my name tattooed too, then, huh."

Thor blurts out a little laugh. He hadn't heard Loki make a joke before. "Yeah, sure, I'll get right on that." He looks down at his chest and sighs at the mess he's made of himself. "Where would I even put it."

Loki touches a patch of bare skin on Thor's collarbone. "Here?"

"I was saving that spot for another skull and flames," Thor says dryly. "Oh, you want to see the worst one? This one takes the fuckin' cake."

Thor gets up and starts undoing his belt buckle. Loki looks alarmed until he realizes Thor only means to pull down the band of his pants just enough to show his upper asscheek. There, he's got a yellow daffodil with a smiling face, etched in a bleeding black outline.

"Voila. The pee-ez de resistance."

Loki's eyes light up. He laughs, a giggly, airy sort of sound. "Why'd you get that?"

"Lost a bet when I got here. Wasn't as good a shot as I thought I was, back then." He peers at Loki over his shoulder and grins. "Come to think of it, there's plenty of real estate on my ass if you want me to get your name done."

Loki laughs again. Thor finds he likes the sound.

"You would, would you?"

Thor hitches up his pants back up and redoes his belt. "Fuck it, why not."

They smile at each other. Suddenly, it feels just a little less uncomfortable between them.

"So why a daffodil?" Loki asks.

"I used to get called that when I first got here because of my hair. And because I was...not bad looking. So I got the tats, and I got big. I didn't want the other guys to fuck with me." Thor immediately realizes who he's talking to. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Loki says quietly.

"Anyway." Thor clears his throat. He really is such an ass. "Try not to feel too bad about yours. Once I get my teeth pulled, with these stupid tattoos, I'll be one ugly motherfucker."

"You could never be ugly," says Loki. If Thor didn't know better he'd swear Loki was blushing.

Thor doesn't know what to make of that, either.

That night, Loki moves to go down on him, as he does every night. Thor suddenly desires something more. He hasn't been laid in so long. He misses actual sex.

And sure, Loki is a boy, but he's readily available. Sometimes that can be enough for a man as starved of touch as Thor is.

Would Loki lie there like the Compound's sex workers, his eyes zoned out and faraway?

"Do you like getting fucked?"

Loki appears caught off-guard by the question. He sort of laughs, incredulous.

"I mean it," Thor presses. "Do you like it?"

Loki seems to think for a minute. "When it's slow it isn't bad," he says carefully. "But it can hurt a lot too." He looks at Thor sharply. "Why, d'you want to?"

Yeah, Thor's mind supplies.

"No. Just wondering."

Loki fixes that stare on him. "Seems to me you wouldn't have asked if you weren't at least thinking about it."

"Fine. Maybe I was. Thinking about it," says Thor confrontationally, to mask the blush forming on his face. "Is that a problem?"

Loki shakes his head. "Actually, I was wondering why you haven't already. If you're worried about diseases I was treated before I got here. I'm clean."

"It's not - that," Thor says.

"Then what?"

"I don't want to hurt you," Thor says, because the truth sounds stupider: *I don't want you to hate it.*

Loki half smiles, as if this is a precious thing to say.

"Well...you're a big guy. I'll need lube to take you. And go slow! At least at first, until I get used to it. It's no different than fucking a girl in the ass, right?"

"I guess," says Thor, flustered.

"Also -"

"Also what."

Loki goes quiet for a long minute. Then he says: "I don't like having hands around my neck. I don't like being choked."

"Okay," Thor says, uneasily.

Loki seems to relax, after that. He sits up.

"Does it bother you that I'm not a girl?"

"I don't...know," Thor says.

"Not enough not to get hard when I put your dick in my mouth." Loki says wryly, and Thor feels himself blush harder. "Well, fucking shouldn't be much different. You don't have to touch my junk or anything. In the dark you won't be able to tell. I can act real girly, if you like. Or I could keep quiet, if the sound of my voice takes you out of it. I can do whatever you want. It doesn't mean anything if you like it. Lots of straight men fuck boys."

"Jesus," Thor mutters, half to himself. "What happened to you."

The room falls into silence. The breadth of their years apart feels like a chasm.

"I grew up," Loki says simply. "Anyway, it's what I'm here for. Don't think too much about it. It's just sex. You'll like it, I promise."

In one smooth motion, Loki climbs in his lap. Thor is too stunned to do anything about it.

"How long has it been for you, anyway?"

Thor has to think, which is hard to do with Loki's warm weight over his crotch. The last time would have been with Jane, early in her pregnancy.

"A...year?"

"That's a long time for a man like you," Loki says, in an odd voice Thor has never heard before. Suggestive, like a porno, and so out of character that Thor isn't sure he'd heard him correctly. It weirds him out. It's also kind of hot.

“Uh...”

"I bet you miss it," Loki continues in that same overly-sexual tone. He rolls his hips. "I bet you fuck hard."

Thor swallows dryly. "I thought you said we needed lube...."

"Never mind. I can make do." Loki curls over so that his face is inches from Thor's. "You wanna fuck me, Thor? Hm? Wanna fuck me hard?"

The way he says *fuck* sounds harsh, aggressive, even punitive. It has the same effect as taking a bucket of ice water to the face.

Thor grips Loki by the shoulders. "What's wrong with you?!"

Loki stops. He looks shaken, as if he'd been startled out of a trance. "I thought you wanted to."

"Well, now I don't know! Get off."

Loki dismounts and stiffly lays down on his side of the bed. "I'm sorry," he says in his normal small voice.

"It's just... *weird*, okay? Don't act so weird."

Loki exhales jaggedly. "How do you want me to act?"

"Normal! Jesus! Can you be normal for five fucking minutes?"

At that, Loki shuts down completely. He's as flicked off as a light switch. He stares ahead at the ceiling, but his eyes are dull and unseeing.

"I'm not mad at you. It's just a little...much. It's been awhile for me. I'm a little excitable." Thor laughs, to mask the profound awkwardness of what just happened. "I feel like maybe we got off on the wrong foot with the, with the blow jobs. It's given you the wrong impression about me. I didn't get you for, uh. Sex work. Not necessarily. I'm not saying I don't *want* to, we just don't *have* to."

Thor says this and kicks himself, because despite how troubled he is by Loki's behaviour, he really does enjoy Loki's blow jobs, and the darker part of him still wants Loki to get him off.

"If you want to I don't see what's the problem," Loki says.

"Maybe I want to wait."

Loki looks at him flatly. "Are you going to romance me first, Thor."

His tone is blasé, almost sarcastic. Like a cruel joke at his own expense.

"Oookay." Thor sits up. "I think I need some fresh air." Thor starts pulling his socks on.

Loki sits up too. "Now?"

"Yeah, now. Just, chill, okay? I'll be back in a bit."

It's snowing lightly outside, which Thor prefers over freezing rain. Snow somehow seems less cold than freezing rain; it doesn't chill you to the core in the same way. Besides, the only instance the Compound ever looks somewhat decent is when the yard is blanketed by a layer of fresh, untrodden snow. Thor appreciates it while he can. In a few days, the yard will become a sludgy, mucky, dirty mess, as it always does.

Thor is somehow not surprised when the door opens and Loki slides out.

"Hey," Loki says, sitting down next to him on the front step.

“Hey.”

Loki eyes the cigarette hanging at Thor’s lips. “That’s your fresh air?”

“It’s better than fresh air,” Thor mutters. The nicotine is clearing his head and helping his erection go down: both of which are desperately needed at the moment.

"It's not good for you."

“We’re all gonna die somehow,” Thor says. "Lung cancer being just one of the many methods available to me. I like to keep my options open. Keeps it interesting."

Loki rests his chin on his knees and wraps his arms around his legs. He looks so much like a little kid that Thor can hardly stand to look at him - especially after what just happened. It’s quiet between them, and awkward. Thor feels compelled to fill the silence.

"The world is a strange place, huh. That you and I should meet again like this, after so many years.. Almost seems like fate. If you believe in that sort of thing."

Loki eyes him. “Do you?”

“Pft. If this is what fate had in store for me, then it can suck my dick. No, I’m here because of my own shitty choices and a run of bad luck.” Thor takes a drag on his cigarette and turns his head to exhale the smoke away from Loki’s face. Before he thinks better of it, Thor asks, “What about you, huh? How'd you wind up here?”

“The same, I suppose,” Loki answers, and he sounds so *sad* that Thor is glad he doesn’t elucidate. Thor doesn’t think he wants to know.

"You wanna hear something really fucky?" Thor goes on. "I wasn't even supposed to be working the night you came in. I was called in at the last minute to take that shift. But, I did. And here we are."

Thor leaves the implication unsaid: that if he wasn't on duty that night, Loki would've been processed, just like all the others from that shipment. Thor can't think about what he does too much. It makes him want to put a gun in his mouth.

"I just wanted to show you I'm grateful..." Loki says.

Thor sighs. "Yeah. I got that."

Loki is quiet again for another few minutes.

"Do you wish you had Jane instead of me?"

The question gives Thor whiplash. He sputters on his cigarette smoke. "Uh...wow. That's a bit loaded. Right for the jugular."

Loki's stare is incisive. He's holding firm to the question so Thor can't weasel his way out of it.

"I wish ...Jane and I had never met," Thor says, and feels this deeply, in his bones; the deepest truth he knows. "That's not to say I didn't care for her - I did - though we had us some real fucking rows. I wish she was never brought here in the first place. I wish she'd had a happier life than the one I was able to give her."

Another pang hits Thor in the chest. It makes him sad to think Jane had met her end here, in this grim place, alongside the son Thor never had the chance to hold. She deserved better than that.

"So no. I don't wish I had her instead of you. I don't wish this life on anyone."

"What was she like?" Loki asks.

Thor thinks for a minute. "She was...beautiful."

Loki waits for Thor to continue, but nothing else comes.

“That's it?”

Thor appends: "I saw her come off the truck and I thought she was beautiful and I wanted her for myself. What did you expect?"

“Something else besides just ‘beautiful’. How long were you together?”

Thor exhales a puff of smoke. “Three years.”

“And that’s all you have to say about her?”

No, Thor has a lot more to say. Jane was certainly beautiful, but she was also difficult. Wild and stubborn, intelligent - the most intelligent person Thor had ever met - but most of all, she was resentful. Resentful of Thor. Of being stuck with him in their crummy shack, living off scraps. Resentful of having to sleep with him.

“You’re acting like I’m supposed to say she was my soulmate,” Thor says bitterly. "Shouldn’t you be a little more jaded by now? Jesus. You turned that porn star shit off and on like a goddamn tap. You know that's messed up right? Someone fucked you up in the head, to make you act like that.”

Loki winces. Thor feels it like a pain in his teeth. Thor realizes this might have been a little too accurate.

"Sorry. I'm a little rough around the edges. I talk before I think sometimes. Jane hated that about me."

"I can uh, be more submissive," Loki offers. “Whatever you're into, I'll do. I'm very open minded."

Thor makes a face that can only be described as *yikes*. "That doesn't exactly make me feel better."

"Well, what do the sex workers you visit act like?"

"I don't -" Thor begins, then stops. How did Loki find out about that? It's true he'd been an occasional patron of the Compound's brothel in the years before he'd gotten Jane, but the cost was prohibitive, and moreover Thor started to feel sorry for the workers there. "I don't do that anymore. It's too much of a bummer."

Loki smiles sadly. "That bad, huh."

"Besides, I got Jane and I wanted to give us an honest shot - not go sleeping around behind her back and give her a disease or something. No offense."

Loki merely shrugs.

Thor goes on: "This is going to sound stupid - because it is - but I really thought that I could make it work. I thought if I was kind enough, patient enough, she'd warm up to me. But she never did. Not really. Maybe I'm not as kind or patient as I thought."

"You didn't.... get rid of her?"

"Of course not," Thor says, appalled. "Why would you even say that?"

Loki just tucks his chin into his knees and stares at the ground.

"I'm not going to get rid of you. Okay? You're stuck with me. Believe me." Thor jostles Loki's shoulder as an attempt to lighten the mood. "Lucky you, huh."

"D'you mean that?" Loki says, turning to Thor, but he isn't laughing. His eyebrows are pinched together.

"Yeah, Loki," Thor says. "Yeah."

Thor puts his arm around Loki and pats his back. It feels like the right thing to do - the kind of thing you'd see in a movie at a moment like this. In response, Loki does something strange: he nestles into the crook of Thor's arm and rests his head on Thor's shoulder. It's unexpected, but kind of nice. They sit like that in silence for awhile, until Thor starts to feel squirmy. Thor doesn't know

if he should keep his hand on Loki's back or something. Would that be weird? Or would it be weirder to pull his hand away? Thor knows jack shit about these kinds of things.

"Look, uh. I think we should forgo on the sex for awhile. Until things settle down a bit, yeah? No need to rush into anything. We have lots of time to get to know each other better."

It's impossible to gauge Loki's reaction from Thor's vantage point, so Thor can't tell if Loki likes this idea, if he's surprised by it, or some combination thereof. All Loki does is let out a small huff, which is carried on the wind as a little cloud of condensation.

"If that's what you want," Loki finally says. He shakes Thor's arm off and stands up. "It's cold. I'm going back inside."

Thor offers a lame little smile. "I won't be long."

Loki closes the door gently behind him, and Thor is once again left alone, wondering what the hell just happened.

The following days feel more awkward than ever. They spend most of their time apart, coming together mostly just to eat and sleep. Loki continues to cook and clean as he's supposed to, and Thor drinks a little too much with dinner and puts himself to bed early four nights in a row. It's the best strategy he can think of to evade any more uncomfortable conversations - or worse, to have Loki try to seduce him again.

Thor thinks he's being sly about it until Loki turns to him after dinner and asks, "Are you avoiding me?"

Thor smiles wanly. He didn't think he was so transparent.

"Just tired from work," he says, because he doesn't want to admit the real reason: it's impossible to look at Loki without imagining the way he'd straddled his lap, goading him into sex. Thor can't get it out of his mind, nor can he reconcile that image with the one he has of Loki as shy, skittish little kid. Thor feels bad for having been aroused, but at the same time, he also regrets having taken sex off the table. He misses Loki's blow jobs. Moreover, he misses being touched.

No - space is good. That'll give Thor time to process what *it* is that's going on between them. Thor is not gay; of that he is sure, but he supposes he can't altogether be straight either. He's simply a man, living with a male live-in sex worker, with whom he isn't actually having any sex.

From the look on Loki's face, Thor can tell he isn't buying this excuse. In fact, Loki seems almost...hurt, which Thor finds baffling. Thor would be ecstatic to not have to suck dick every night.

The last thing Thor wants is to have another *discussion*, so he redirects the proceedings:

"Actually, I was thinking, you wanna play some cards?"

Thor figures this to be as good a diversion as any. If they're going to be stuck together for the foreseeable future, there's no reason they can't at least be friends.

Loki exhales and sits back down at the table. "Okay."

Thor retrieves his deck from his junk drawer. They play a few rounds of Crazy Eights, and Loki beats him soundly more times than not. It's actually pretty fun. Loki seems to loosen up a little. Thor likes how Loki smiles so genuinely when he wins. He's got a nice smile. His teeth are very straight and white.

Afterwards, Thor goes to bed. He's semi-asleep and a little tipsy when his housemate finally joins him. The bed creaks under the added weight, and there's a whoosh of cold air as the blankets are pulled back. Thor sighs at the pleasant feeling of another warm body settling in behind him. A hand rests on Thor's back between his shoulder blades.

"Jane..." Thor murmurs groggily, still hazy from sleep.

The hand retracts, and does not come back.

A massive snowstorm slams the Compound and brings operations to a halt. The roads to and from the harbour are rendered untraversable, and the switchbacks leading up to the Compound (precarious at the best of times) become bona fide death traps. A few powerlines are even taken out. Thor hears whispers that segments of the Compound's electrified fence are down. He doesn't know which segments, and he isn't about to climb the fence and find out for himself.

There is nothing to do until the roads are plowed, so Thor is let off early. The paths surrounding the main building are being cleared by laborers as Thor makes his way back towards his cabin. It's snowing lightly now, but there's already a second layer of snow accumulating on paths that had previously been shovelled.

Thor finds Loki by the fence near the cabins. Loki had likewise been conscripted into snow clearing duty, by the looks of it. He's leaning on his shovel as he chats with a red headed woman. Thor recognizes her as Green's wife; she's got a green ribbon tied around her arm. She'd been a Compound sex worker before Green snatched her up. Thor recalls having slept with her a few times - that must be how Loki found out about that. Thor is ashamed to say he can't remember her name. It starts with an S.

Thor feels obliged to go up and say hi, seeing as they both saw him. The two of them fall silent as Thor comes up. It's apparent they were just talking about him. Both their cheeks are bright pink from the cold and from exertion.

"Hey," says Thor.

"We're just taking a break," Loki explains, as if he's worried Thor might be angry at their lack of industriousness. "My asthma acts up in the cold, especially when I breathe hard. I'll get back to work in a minute."

"Okay," says Thor. Loki's voice does sound a little wheezy.

"I was making sure he's okay," the girl pipes up. She has a fetching splay of freckles across her nose, and her red hair frizzes out from beneath her oversized hood, which is lined with matted fake fur. Thor always thought she was pretty.

"Hi, uh-"

"Sigryn."

“Sigryn, Yeah.” Thor can’t think of anything to say. “Big snowstorm, hey.”

"Yessir."

"Lots of snow left to clear?"

“Tryin’ to keep up, sir.”

“Good. That’s - good.”

Sigryn keeps smiling vacantly. “Um, I better be getting back to work. See ya later, Loki.”

Lok offers a little smile. “Yeah. See you.”

Sigryn nods at Thor, “Commander.” She picks up her shovel and makes her way back towards the barracks, where there's still pathways to be cleared. Thor watches her go until she’s out of earshot.

Thor turns to Loki. “Making friends?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s nice.” Thor hopes whatever Sigryn said about him wasn’t too terrible. Thor has never purposefully hurt any of the Compound sex workers, but he grants that her recollection of their encounters might have a different tint than his own. “She’s a...nice girl.”

Loki looks at him like he can see right through his bullshit. “She knows this place.”

Thor takes out a cigarette out of his pack and lights it. “Gave it a glowing, five star review, I bet.”

Loki gazes out towards the ocean. His brow is furrowed against the biting wind coming off the water. Beyond the fence is the cliff overlooking the sea, the harbour, and far in the distance, only visible on clear days, is **the Rig**, like a great leviathan rising from the ocean. Tar black smoke emanates from its vents, staining that part of the sky a sickly greyish-green colour, like a bruise. Thor has always thought it to be vaguely arachnoid-shaped, like a great exoskeleton. Or a daddy long-legs.

“She’s been in the Compound for six years and she couldn’t tell me what goes on out there.” Loki looks at Thor pointedly. “Don’t you think that’s strange?”

Thor makes a non-committal noise and takes a drag on his cigarette. He already dislikes where this conversation is going.

“She said no one knows. At least, none of the workers do. But you're not a worker.”

Thor grins sardonically and opens his arms. “I’m Blackey’s lackey.”

“Have you ever been out there?”

“Out where.”

Loki shoots him a look. “The Rig.”

Thor exhales a puff of smoke. “No.”

Loki considers this, as if trying to determine whether Thor is fibbing. He gazes back out towards the sea. His jaw clenches. “I wouldn’t have spent a single day out there. I’d have jumped into the ocean the moment they put me on it. I’d rather wash up on shore as a corpse.”

"Yeah," Thor says absently, giving the nub of his cigarette a flick. What Loki doesn’t know is that barriers had long ago been erected to prevent jumpers. Nobody gets off the Rig, not anymore.

"Is it true what they say about Riggers?" Loki asks.

"I dunno," Thor answers neutrally. "What is it that they say."

Loki's laces his fingers in the chainlink fence and rattles it. "The other conscripts on the truck, they said that there's something about the Rig that changes people. Fucks 'em up. Physically and, you know. In the head. I dunno if it's radiation or...something else. But that can't be true." Loki squints at Thor. "Can it?"

Thor shrugs and takes another drag on his cigarette. "People say a lot of stuff."

"But it *is* quarantined. That's what Sigryn just told me."

"Yeah, well. Maybe you shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"You must know *something*. That's why you made that comment - about, about being a Rig Pig's bitch. What's so bad about doing sex work out there as opposed to anywhere else?"

"You make it sound like doing sex work for me is such a chore," Thor puts his hand over his heart. "Oh Loki. You *wound* me."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. You want to know what I think?" Loki's voice starts to raise. "I think you know *exactly* what goes on there. I think you know why they need so many conscripts, and why none of them ever seem to come back. That's why you're dodging my questions. You know and you don't want to tell me."

Thor watches in the peripheral as some soldiers pass. They don't appear to have heard Loki, but they could've.

"You better watch your tone," Thor says darkly. "Someone could overhear you talking to me like that."

Loki's nostrils flare, but he wisely reins himself in. "I'm just saying," he goes on, "You could at least do me the courtesy of telling me the truth."

"Do you a *courtesy*," Thor repeats, incredulous. "Have you considered, Loki, that I *am* doing you a courtesy? Maybe," Thor gets right into Loki's face, keeping his voice low and measured, "Curious little boys should stick to laundry and not worry their pretty heads about things that don't concern them."

Loki stares him down. His eyes are bright and defiant. "How can you say it doesn't concern me."

It's becoming clear that Loki isn't going to drop it.

"You really want to know?" Thor asks as he snuffs out his cigarette under his boot.

Then, in one swift motion, Thor grabs Loki by the upper arms and hauls him up against the chain link fence. Loki is slight, easy to manhandle, and doesn't put up much resistance. Maybe he's too surprised; maybe he's just used to not fighting back.

"What are you doing? Thor - ow."

"If you wanna know so bad," Thor threatens, "Then you can go out there and find out for yourself."

Loki whimpers. "Thor, you're hurting me."

Thor gives Loki a shake, and the fence rattles cacophonously behind him. "Do you want that? You wanna go out there?"

Loki shakes his head fervently. "*No*."

"Or do you wanna stay here with me?"

"I want to stay with you!"

"Then listen to me carefully, because I will not be having this conversation with you again. Do not ask me about the Rig. Do not ask anyone about the Rig. Don't look at it; don't even *think* about it. Because if you do, you will not like what I will do to you. This is your one and only warning. Do I

make myself clear."

Loki's voice is a croak. "Yes."

Thor holds him like that for a few moments, so tightly Loki's boots are almost off the ground. When Thor finally releases him, Loki loses his footing and stumbles into a snowbank near the fence. He takes a moment to collect himself, as if to register what just happened. Then, with one hand gripping the chainlinks for balance, he pulls himself out of the snow. He smooths down his rumpled coat as he wheezes, heavier than before. With trembling hands Loki pulls off one of his mittens, fishes out his inhaler from his coat pocket, and takes a puff on it.

He spares only a single glance at Thor, but the image is seared in Thor's brain like a brand: it's a look of seething humiliation, *anger*, and mistrust. It only lasts a second. Then Loki picks up his shovel and briskly makes his way towards the barracks, where there is still plenty of snow to be cleared.

Once he's gone, Thor closes his eyes and lets out a long, heavy, beleaguered sigh:

Fuck.

two of nine

Chapter Notes

Okay, I get that we're all probably dystopia-ed out lately. But I suuuuuure had a lot of quarantine time to work on this. Hope it's as cathartic for y'all as it was for me. Stay safe everyone.

Thor is having a nightmare. **The Rig** is alive and moving towards shore like a spider, with each of its legs rising up out of the ocean in turn. Its smokestacks curl backwards, revealing a great gaping, void-like maw. It is hungry, always hungry. *Insatiable*. Out of its mouth comes a deep rumble, like ten thousand voices moaning in unison.

Thor wakes dripping in cold sweat and panting. His teeth ache; he'd been clenching his jaw.

Loki is awake too, watching him.

"Are you okay?"

"I just need some water."

Thor flees to the bathroom and splashes freezing water on his face. He clutches the edge of the sink to keep upright; his hands are shaking. When he looks in the mirror, his face looks panicked, almost deranged.

"Christ," he mutters.

The Compound is already filthy after the snowstorm. It only takes a day or two before that pristine cloak of whiteness becomes nothing but brown slurry. A few kids are attempting to make grubby snowmen in the yard - the children of the Compound's sex workers, laborers, soldiers. Through the years Thor has watched babies be born, grow up, and become laborers or soldiers themselves. Thor can't fathom having to raise a child here. He feels bad for thinking it, but he's glad that his son

died. How could Thor endure playing catch in the yard with a boy who has never known the feel of grass, who has never climbed a real tree; whose entire world consists of concrete, gravel, and barbed wire?

When Thor got the news that Jane had miscarried, all he could feel was a profound sense of relief.

With a frown, he turns away from the children and continues making his way back to the cabin. It is en route that he comes across a strange scene: Loki, splayed out on the ground, with a young-looking soldier looming over him. Loki's canvas sack has burst and there are groceries splayed on the ground everywhere. Thor can't tell if Loki slipped on the icy pathway, or if he was pushed.

"Sir," the soldier says, giving Thor a startled salute. He's not a soldier in Thor's unit, but he clearly knows who Thor is. "Just makin' myself acquainted with the newbie."

"Don't you have better things to do? You're a Tower sentry?"

"Yessir."

"Your shift should be starting in five. You don't want me to report you as late, do you."

"No, sir."

"Then I suggest," Thor says darkly, "You hustle your ass over there."

The soldier does, rushing away without a second glance - probably eager to avoid inciting Thor's displeasure.

Thor looks down at Loki. "Did he bother you?"

"I'm fine," sniffs Loki. "I just want to get these home."

Thor bends down. "Let me help-"

"I got it," Loki snaps, and Thor backs off. He's been so prickly, lately.

Loki brushes the dirty snow off the potatoes with his mittens as he puts them, one by one, back into his canvas sack. "People act like they've never seen a male sex worker before," he mutters.

"He *was* bothering you. You need to be wearing your ribbon."

"Yeah, I forgot," Loki says tiredly as he stands up. "The only person who can push me around is you."

Thor narrows his eyes. "*Excuse me.*"

Loki flinches. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. Uh, what do you want for dinner tonight."

"Is that what you think I do? Push you around?"

"I don't think anything," Loki says demurely. His face is so thoroughly blank that it's impossible to read him at all. It's as though he truly is devoid of thought.

"Maybe I'm just trying to look out for you," Thor says lowly. "Did you think of that? Hm? Maybe I'm doing you a favour."

"I don't think *anything*," Loki says again. "I just want to get these home."

"Whatever," Thor huffs. It's not worth it to pick a fight.

Thor gazes out beyond Loki's shoulder, and something catches his attention: the Rig. But something seems off. Thor could swear it seems...closer.

Thor has to blink a few times. He's looked out at that thing for...God, how many years. He knows where it's supposed to sit on the horizon relative to the Compound. It can't be closer. It can't.

I'm losing my fucking mind.

Something shakes his arm and Thor is startled out of his reverie. Loki is staring at him.

"Is everything okay?" he asks, slowly.

"Yeah, yeah," stammers Thor. "I'm - uh. A little tired, I guess. Long day."

Loki glances briefly out towards the Rig, then back at Thor.

"So, uh. Dinner," Thor tries. "Potatoes? What else you got?"

"Ground pork. Canned corn."

"Good - that's good."

Loki looks at him oddly. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm just tired. I'll meet you back at home, yeah?"

Loki makes something like a shepherd's pie: fried ground pork with onions and mashed potatoes. Thor likes it because it is basically a mush and he doesn't have to do much chewing. The corn, however, is more of a tough slog. The kernels get stuck in Thor's gums.

"Could you maybe cook it softer for me next time? My teeth..."

Loki's mouth presses in a tight, unhappy line - the first crack in his otherwise frosty demeanor since their altercation. Loki feels sorry for him, Thor can tell.

"Soon you'll have to boil shit down to a paste," Thor says with a forced laugh. "I'll be back to eating baby food before I even hit my forties."

"Is it getting worse?" Loki asks.

"Well, it isn't getting any better," Thor replies snidely before he can help himself. The pain makes him irritable.

"You need to see someone. They might be infected."

Thor motions around the room. "Who. Who am I gonna go see."

"There must be a doctor onsite...someone who could refer you...."

"Yeah, but unless I get shot on the job it'll cost me to see her. Look. I'm gonna get someone to take some pliers and yank 'em out. I've just been putting it off." Thor is so fed up with the constant, unrelenting, soul-sucking pain he blurts out, "Would you do it if I asked?"

Loki's mouth slackens, either in surprise or horror, Thor can't tell. Probably both.

"Never mind. Forget I asked. I wouldn't want to do it either. Maybe I'll get in a fist fight and someone will punch 'em out for me."

Loki looks at him as if his heart is breaking. His pity has a weird effect on Thor; it's especially potent, given the amount of suffering Loki has likewise endured in his life. Thor has to avert his eyes, because if Loki keeps looking at him like that he might start to cry.

The thing is, Thor is scared of losing his teeth. He's scared of how it will make him look, how it will make his cheeks sink in, how it will affect his speaking voice. He's scared of how people will stare, how he won't be able to eat anything that hasn't been mashed into a sludge. He's scared of being known as *that guy with no teeth*. He's scared it will be the first thing people will notice, and the only thing they'll remember about him. It makes Thor feel especially hopeless, even in this already hopelessly dismal place.

Then Loki does something strange: he gets up out of his chair to stand behind Thor. He curls over, loops his arms around Thor's shoulders, and embraces him gently from behind. Loki holds him like that for a few quiet moments, as if his arms are the only thing keeping Thor from falling apart.

"If you needed me to pull them out, I would," Loki says into his ear.

Thor exhales shakily and nods. Without even noticing, Thor realizes his hands are clasped tightly around Loki's.

Thor sleeps fitfully that night. He rolls onto his back, suddenly wide awake, and realizes Loki isn't beside him. Thor sits up. Light is seeping in from underneath the bedroom door. Thor gets up out of bed.

Loki is there, in the kitchen, sitting at their table, with an old cooking magazine open in front of him. Thor pads over as he lets his eyes adjust to the brightness.

"I couldn't sleep," Loki explains.

"Yeah. Can't sleep either." Thor doesn't want to admit he got up for a shot or two. Something to dull his senses enough to sleep without dreaming.

"I thought maybe this might help my mind settle, but instead it's just making me hungry." Loki half-smiles, rueful. At Thor's inquisitive look, Loki appends: "I'm not completely illiterate. I can read. I'm just...slower than some people."

Thor can tell he's embarrassed. As if his illiteracy was the product of his own doing.

Thor glances over Loki's shoulder at the recipe header. *Salted Dark Chocolate Tart*. As if anyone can get chocolate anymore after the blight. This magazine must be *really* old.

"Gonna bake that, are you?" Thor asks as he points to the accompanying picture, yellowed with

age. A single decadent slice of cake is sitting atop artful swoops of chocolate and garnished with strawberries.

Loki blurts out a little laugh. "Sure. It'll probably taste like sawdust, though." He sighs mournfully. "I feel like I can't remember what chocolate tastes like."

Thor sits down next to him. Fake chocolate is available from the commissary, but it's coated with a splotchy white film and tastes chemically. Somehow that feels more depressing than not having any chocolate at all.

"Well, you ain't likely to be finding any real chocolate around here, but you could try making something like this." Thor flips to a dog-eared page: *Classic American Apple Pie*. The page is crusty with flour and delicate fingerprints, and Thor is suddenly overcome with melancholy. "There's also a simple cake recipe in here that's doable, although we can't get vanilla extract."

Loki looks baffled. It's as though the thought of baking something himself hadn't crossed his mind, even though he's staring at a baking magazine.

"Me?"

"Why not? Flour and sugar we have. Apples, you can still get at the commissary this time of year. They're mealy as hell but they're okay in a pie. I got a pan here somewhere, and a rolling pin. Jane used to bake sometimes," Thor explains. "Made her feel normal, she said."

Loki chews his lip, considering, then shakes his head. "I'd probably screw it up and waste a bunch of ingredients..."

"Some of Jane's experiments turned out better than others, but nothing she ever made was inedible. And she did some weirdo shit when there were shortages. When she couldn't get apples she'd make the pie filling out of crackers."

Loki looks at him skeptically. "Crackers."

"Yeah. Mock-apple pie. It's a thing, I guess."

"What did it taste like?"

"Didn't taste much like anything. Buttery."

"Was it good?"

"Pretty good, actually. You couldn't really tell it was crackers. You couldn't really tell what it was at all."

Loki smiles a bit, then looks back down at the page. "You really want me to make this?"

"I didn't say I wanted you to make me anything," Thor says innocently. "You're the one staring at a baking magazine at two in the morning. Are you gonna keep torturing yourself or are you gonna do something about it?"

Thor can tell Loki is tempted; Thor has long suspected that Loki has a bit of a sweet tooth. He puts an ungodly amount of sugar in his coffee. He'd probably put sugar in everything if Thor would let him.

"I've never baked anything before," Loki says.

"How hard can it be? Just follow the instructions."

Thor realizes this may be easier said than done for someone like Loki, whose reading comprehension might be lacking.

"I'll do it with you, how about. Huh? A little team project. I'm off Thursday night." Thor shakes Loki's shoulder. "It'll be *fun*."

Loki looks at his hand, then at him. That weird, penetrating, unreadable stare.

Thor sighs. "Or not. Whatever."

"No, I want to!" Loki says in a rush. "I'd like that."

He smiles then, so bright and encouraging it's almost blinding. It's unnerving how he can turn expressions like that on and off.

"Okay," Thor clears his throat. "All we need is apples, I guess. And definitely more butter."

Loki nods quickly. "I can get those before then."

"Okay," Thor says again. "It's a date?"

This is a weird thing to say to Loki, Thor's live-in sex worker. Loki, whom Thor has bought, whom Thor essentially owns.

Loki's smile transitions into something softer, more genuine. "Yeah, he says. "A date."

Loki seems a little more animated in the following days. He must *really* be gunning for that pie.

Thor studies the recipe in preparation. He'd never baked anything before either. Jane made it look easy. Thor's involvement was limited to creaming the sugar and butter, since they didn't have a mixer and Jane's arm would tire if she did it by herself. She liked sharing her treats with the other workers and compound wives - with anyone who wasn't a soldier.

Loki comes home from the commissary and sets down his canvas bag of goods triumphantly. The apples are soft and bruised, and they look like they're on the verge of spoiling. Quality Thor has come to expect from the Compound's commissary, but they'll do for a pie.

Thor holds up a little foil package. "What's this."

"Butter," answers Loki.

"There's two of 'em."

"Yeah...." says Loki slowly. "That's what you told me to get. Two units."

"Two *half* cup units. These are quarter cup units."

Loki's eyebrows pinch together. "What?"

"The recipe calls for one cup for the crust," Thor holds up the two butter units demonstratively. "Together these only make a half cup. It's not enough."

"Oh." Loki's cheeks go pink. "Uh, I can go back to the commissary and get more."

"Never mind," Thor huffs, annoyed. "It'll be closed by the time you get to the front of the line."

They sit in silence for a while. Thor doesn't have another night off like this for at least a week, maybe longer, and the apples don't look like they'll last that long. This was their only night to do it. So much for fresh hot pie. It seems incomprehensible to Thor that Loki would make a mistake like that.

"You do understand..." Thor's voice trails off. "Fractions?"

Loki is quiet for a while. Then he says, "Four is bigger than two, so it seems like one over four should be bigger than one over two. But it's not. I know it's not." His voice seems to get even softer. "But sometimes I still get it confused."

"Sit down," Thor sighs.

And that is how pie day turns into another kind of pie day.

“See how the pie is divided by three? One slice for you, one slice for me, one slice for later,” Thor explains, curled over the table with Loki at his side. “We each eat two pieces of the pie. That’s two-thirds of the pie gone, and so there’s one third left. Okay? But say we cut each of these three slices into two.” Thor does so in his illustration. “That means the pie is cut into six pieces. Sixths. Expressed like this: one over six.”

Loki stares blankly at Thor’s pie drawing on the table. He’d been so keen on this pie thing. It was the most animated he’d been since Thor had gotten him. Thor regrets having opened this can of worms, but he feels he can’t give up on it yet, either.

“So if you’re halving a recipe, and it calls for one third of such-and-such an ingredient, how much do you need?”

"I'd use half of the scoop."

"Okay. But what I'm asking you is, what is that measurement? What is half of one third?"

Loki doesn’t say anything. The only sound in the kitchen is the tick-tick-tick of the clock on the wall.

“Half of one-third is one sixth,” Thor says, frustrated.

Loki’s voice is small as a mouse’s. “I’m sorry.”

Thor sighs. It’s hard to be angry when he looks so utterly defeated - like a mutt that’s been kicked one too many times.

“Fractions are hard. Everyone has trouble with fractions - even people who went to school. Just think, Loki. Because each third is divided into two, that means the pie is cut into six slices, right?”

"Yeah...."

"So halving a third makes a sixth. Right?"

"I guess," Loki says uncertainly.

Thor powers on. "Okay. So if you're going to double a recipe that calls for one third of a cup. How much do you need?"

"I would put in two scoops of these."

"That's two thirds of a cup. Expressed like this: two over three. Yeah?"

"Yeah..." Loki says again, like he's trying to end the lesson sooner by agreeing. Thor realizes the only thing he's accomplishing is humiliating Loki.

Thor suddenly, desperately needs a smoke.

"I think that's enough for tonight. We'll pick up again another time, yeah?"

Thor is stubborn; he takes after Odin in that regard. It used to make Jane crazy. He refuses to give up on this fractions thing. Not yet.

Thor incorporates measuring cup into his fraction lesson plan the following week. It goes about as well as the first go around. Loki understands the math intuitively, but putting it down on paper is another matter. He simply doesn't have the background, and Thor is not necessarily the most patient teacher. Thor gives up within twenty minutes and excuses himself for a little fresh air. For whatever reason, Loki follows him outside.

Loki kicks at dirty clumps of snow so that they scatter across the yard.

"I know geography really well," he says, as Thor lights up a cigarette. He seems agitated. "I used to study Odin's globe, the one he had in his office. I was fascinated by it. I can name any country you point to, just about. Maybe not those islands in the Pacific...but certainly all of Europe, the

Americas.”

“Okay,” says Thor.

“I’m a decent skateboarder too. And I can draw pretty good.”

“Okay,” says Thor, slowly.

“I’m not stupid,” Loki says firmly. “I want you to know that.”

Thor’s eyebrows raise. “I never said that you were.”

“You think so, though.” Loki’s arms tighten around himself. “I frustrate you.”

“I’m not a very good teacher. And anyway, it’s Odin’s fault for not sending you to school. That doesn’t make you stupid.”

“A lot of people would say it does.”

“What people?”

“*People*,” Loki says with a snuffle. “When people look at me, all they see is a sex worker. But it’s not who I am. It’s what I do, but it’s not *me*. There are lots of things about me other than that. I’m a human being. I have hopes and dreams like anyone. I have feelings.”

He says it so vehemently, as if he’s trying to convince the world. And himself.

"I'm not stupid," Loki says again. "I'm not."

“I know you aren't,” Thor says gingerly.

Loki's mouth sets in a firm line. He takes his inhaler out from one of his pockets, shakes it and takes a puff. He seems to calm down a little after that. "But I'm also trying to be realistic. I will never be anything other than this. A laborer, maybe, when I'm old. That's it. I appreciate you tryna teach me but there isn't really any point."

"No point? The point is that I want you to make me that pie."

Loki looks at him flatly. "I'm being serious. What does it matter to you whether I can read or write or do math?"

"It just *does*."

"You're only trying to teach me because you feel bad for me," Loki accuses.

"Of course I feel bad for you," Thor bites back. "If my dad had sprung to send you to school, you wouldn't have turned out like this."

"Turned out like what?" Loki asks. "A dumb slut?"

He says it offhandedly, like any other simple fact. Like calling the sky blue or the ocean deep.

Thor's mouth opens but nothing comes out.

"You know what? Forget it. Forget the fucking pie." Thor reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a few credit notes and shoves them at Loki. "Why don't you take this and go to the commissary before it closes and get me something to drink."

Loki accepts the crumpled notes passively. "What do you want?"

"I don't care. Whatever is cheap."

Loki comes back about forty minutes later with a bottle of whiskey. There must've been a line for him to have taken so long. He sets the bottle down on the table in front of Thor.

"I'm sorry about how I acted earlier. Whatever you want to teach me, I'll try my best to learn."

Thor undoes the screw cap on the bottle. In a derisive voice he says, "I thought you said there was no point."

"All the same. It's nice of you to try. You've been nothing but kind to me since I got here. I should be more respectful." Loki pauses. "I really don't mind giving you head."

"God, drop it already, will you? *Jesus Christ*." Thor sloppily pours a shot. "You want one or what?"

Loki's got that wary, watchful face on. Thor is starting to hate it.

At last Loki nods, and Thor goes to the cupboard behind them to get the other glass. Loki sits down next to Thor. Thor sloshes two ounces of whiskey into his tumbler.

"It'll burn like hell so do it fast." Thor tells him. He clicks his shot glass against Loki's. "Cheers."

They down their shots in a single go. Thor hisses at the sting of it, but it's got a kind of pleasant heat going down his throat.

Loki's face contorts into a wince, like he'd taken a swig of cleaner. "Ugh."

"Yeah, it's crap. Warms you up, though, huh." Thor clears his throat. "Listen. I don't think you're dumb, or a slut. Really I don't. You shouldn't call yourself that. You didn't have a choice in doing what you do - unlike me. I *did* go to school, I had a shot at doing literally anything else with my life. And look at what I ended up doing. So really, of the two of us, who's the stupid one, huh?"

Thor forces a laugh. Loki does not crack a smile. His face is utterly expressionless.

"I'm sorry I didn't stop to think about it growing up - why I was going to school and you weren't. I didn't realize how that would...uh, affect you, later on."

I didn't care, Thor thinks, which is the truth, though he doesn't say so.

"I was too wrapped up in my own shit," Thor says instead. "But I get if I'm making you feel uncomfortable with the lessons. I'm not the best teacher."

Thor glances over at Loki. It's as though he isn't even listening.

"Where's the deck of cards?" Loki asks.

Thor blinks. "The junk drawer... You wanna play?"

Loki shakes his head as he gets up. "I want to show you something."

Loki takes it and starts shuffling. He fans them out face down towards the table.

"Pick a card."

"Are you being serious?"

Loki only holds out the fanned deck more insistently. Thor selects a card between his finger and thumb, but when he tries to pull it out, he finds there is too much resistance: Loki is gripping the deck too firmly.

"Not that one," Loki says.

Thor pauses, but then he notices the glimmer of mischief in Loki's eyes.

Thor's lips twitch. "You're fuckin' with me."

Loki suppresses a smile. "Okay, that one. Go ahead and look at it, but don't tell me what it is."

Thor does. It's the five of clubs.

"Put it back on top of the deck," Loki instructs, and Thor does that too. Loki starts to shuffle the cards.

"No fair that you're the one shuffling!"

Loki's eyebrows raise, but without a further moment's hesitation he hands the deck to Thor. Thor takes it and does his own semblance of a shuffle, but he isn't very thorough, and anyway he only asked to make a point.

Satisfied, he hands the deck back to Loki. Loki splits it in two.

"Left or Right."

Thor gestures. "Right."

Loki sets aside the left half of the deck. He repeats this process, over and over, until the deck is whittled down to just two cards.

"Left or right?"

"Left," Thor says, and Loki puts the right card in the deck with the other discards.

"Now get up from your chair and spin three times and say, 'Mother Cabrini, don't be a meanie, let this be my magic card'."

"What?" Thor laughs. "Okay now I *know* you're fuckin' with me."

"Do you want it to work or not?"

Thor sighs in false exasperation. He gets up and trods in a circle. "Mother Cabrini, don't be a meanie, let this be my magic card." Thor plops back down in his chair.

Loki is unimpressed. "Like you mean it. Come on."

Thor gets up again. He gives it his all this time:

"MOTHER CABRINI DON'T BE A MEANIE, LET THIS BE MY MAGIC CARD."

Loki smiles at this. He waggles his fingers. "Abracadabra," he says, dripping with cheesy relish. "Is this your card?"

He flips it. It's the nine of hearts.

"Uh...no."

"Oh," says Loki. His eyebrows furrow and the mood turns deeply awkward. Then Loki sits back in his chair. An odd expression settles on his face. His face scrunches up, and he lets out a theatrical fake sneeze, complete with a build up of several *ah-ah-ahs* before the final, campy *choo*. He cups his hands over his face, and when he opens them, he's holding something.

"Is *this* your card?" He offers it to Thor: the five of clubs.

"Fuck me!" Thor's face splits in two, and he laughs, longer and harder than he has in a long time. "How'd you do that?!"

Loki smiles secretively and waves his hand in an arc. "Magic."

“Seriously! Tell me how you did that!”

“I didn’t do anything,” Loki says innocently. “You invoked Mother Cabrini’s holy intervention. Besides, a magician never reveals their secrets.”

“That’s really something,” Thor says, still grinning. "That's....wow. Really cool, Loki."

Loki ducks his head and smiles, pleased, as he shuffles the cards. Thor doesn’t miss the practiced way he does it, his long fingers caressing the deck. Thor suddenly has an idea of how Loki had been beating him so soundly at their card games.

“Where’d you learn how to do that?”

“Around,” Loki answers idly.

"Can you do it again?"

Loki shakes his head, still smiling. "I'll show you something else."

A few more magic tricks and altogether too many whiskey shots later, Thor is feeling pretty good. A pleasant buzz has settled over him, making him perhaps easier to fool, but Thor delights in it. Even when he asks to see the same trick over and over again, he can't tell where Loki is making switches or how he's stashing cards. It doesn’t matter; Thor doesn’t really want to know how the tricks are done. It's just nice to forget their circumstances and have some fun for once.

“Can I ask you something?” Loki says, after a lull. “Why’d you leave?”

“Why’d I leave?” Thor repeats. “Like, home?”

“Yeah.”

Thor is caught off guard by the question. He thought it was obvious.

“Because Odin and I did nothing but butt heads. We fought all the time. He wanted me to take over the shop; I could think of no worse fate. I wanted to see the world. I wanted excitement, adventure. I had enough of him trying to ruin my life.” Thor laughs mirthlessly. ”Turns out, I did a much better job of ruining my own life than he ever could.”

Thor means to stop there, but he's had a few drinks, and he keeps talking, giving voice to thoughts he'd hardly even brought himself to consciously acknowledge, let alone speak aloud:

“Part of me wishes I'd had the chance to see him before he died. Not to tell him he was right, of course; I'm too much of a stubborn prick for that. But ...it would have been nice to make peace with him.”

"He wanted that too," says Loki.

Thor looks at Loki curiously. "Did he....did he say that?"

"He cried out for you while he was dying."

"Oh. Wow. Fuck. That's heavy," Thor jokes, when in fact he suddenly feels incredibly overwhelmed. "*Fuck.*"

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you should be. That is some kinda fucked up," Thor says with a shaky laugh. "You should warn a guy before you say shit like that. You're going to give *me* a stroke." Thor scrubs his hand over his face. He's not nearly drunk enough to process this information. "You were there for that?"

Loki nods. “My mom and me.”

It's frankly pathetic that Odin should meet his end that way - surrounded not by family or friends, but by his kept woman and her kid. A pang hits Thor in his chest: *I should have been there*. Thor shuts that train of thought down immediately.

"Well, cheers. He was a miserable old fuck but he could fix anything you put in front of him. I always respected that about him."

Thor downs another shot. The burn is welcomingly distracting.

"You two really stuck it out till the bitter end, huh. Your mom should get a fucking medal."

"There was no one else to take care of him," Loki says simply. "I mean--"

"No, it's fine. It's the truth, isn't it? I sure as hell wasn't around to help," Thor says. And although he feels guilty for having inadvertently offloaded his father's care onto someone else, he's simultaneously, *indescribably* relieved to have avoided that whole situation. He abhorred having to live under Odin's household dictatorship at the best of times; he can't fathom how awful it would've been to suffer Odin's bullshit when he was half-paralyzed. Thor imagines what it would've been like to fulfill Odin's orders as he barked them from a wheelchair or hospital bed, and it leaves him feeling, along with his usual revulsion, rather sad. Pity and resentment: a noxious combination.

"I'm just saying," Thor goes on, "Most people would've hightailed it outta there once he'd had his stroke."

"Because everyone knows whores are fickle and bail as soon as the money dries up," Loki finishes.

"That's not what I meant. And even if it was, I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with that. What good is a broke sugar daddy?"

"She couldn't just abandon him," says Loki. He sounds angry. "He needed her. And besides...he was kind to us. He never hit me, and I'm pretty sure he never hit my mom."

"Never sent you to no school, neither," Thor points out - his latest pet grudge against Odin.

"All the same. He was a good man."

Thor scoffs. If Odin were a good man he would have married Loki's mom. He would have given her son an education. What a fucking low bar, to not beat on a kept woman or her kid.

"Can I ask you something else?" Loki looks at him askance. "Did you ever think about coming back?"

"I dunno," Thor hedges. It's true Thor wants nothing more than to get the hell away from the Compound, but even if he could, he never really considered going home. "Uh, not really."

Loki nods, as if this was something he'd already suspected.

"I do regret this, if that's what you're asking," Thor waves his hand emphatically around the room. "I didn't think it would be this way."

"What did you think it would be like?"

Thor has to think. There is only one word that comes to mind. "Glamorous," he admits, then laughs self-deprecatingly. "I guess that sounds pretty stupid, huh. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, as they say. When you're young and naive the recruiters are all over you, promising you the hottest girls, the best drugs. And, God. I wanted to travel, to visit the other city states. I was so sick of life in ██████████. But in truth I was just a kid. A stupid kid who didn't know shit, who got himself in too deep with the wrong sorts of people...."

It's useless to pinpoint exactly where it all went wrong. Thor began accumulating debts he could not pay, until all he had left were years of his life - his only asset - which he bartered away in units of five, twelve, twenty. It turns out the world is a big place, bigger than Thor anticipated, and much, *much* more cruel.

Thor goes on thoughtfully, "You know, the older I get, the more I want what I ran away from. I want to live somewhere quiet, somewhere stable. Barbecue every night. Mow my lawn. Get a dog or something."

Thor can see it in his mind's eye: himself as a mechanic in Odin's shop, married with a kid or two. It's the kind of life he once found stiflingly dull, and now it hurts so bad Thor can hardly bear to

think about it.

“That sounds nice,” Loki says softly.

“Maybe one day,” Thor says, more for Loki’s benefit than his own. He doesn’t want Loki to know that in all likelihood they’ll both die here.

Thor laughs at himself. Here he is being such a downer. As if he had a monopoly on suffering.

"Why d'you ask?"

Loki looks at the wall in front of him. "I think about it sometimes, how things would've been different if you had come home."

He says it like he knows Thor could have run that shop as well as Odin, or better. Thor could have kept it going after Odin's stroke, and they wouldn't have lost the house. And Loki...well, Thor's not sure where Loki fits into that picture. But Thor doubts he would've been so heartless as to put Loki or his mom out.

"And...I missed you."

“What?” Thor blurts out a laugh. But Loki isn’t joking. He means it.

Loki cocks his head. “You really don’t remember me much, do you?”

Thor can’t say that he does. Loki was a little kid when Thor left. Decidedly uninteresting to a young man fresh into adulthood and eager for adventure.

Loki is staring at him intensely, like he’s looking straight into Thor’s brain. It's unsettling. It makes Thor feel hot all over.

“Uh...” Thor scratches the back of his neck. He can’t think of an answer that wouldn’t make him sound like a complete and utter prick. The fact is, he never gave Loki a second thought. Loki was

simply.... *there*. Like a piece of furniture. Or a cat.

"Well, I remember you," Loki goes on. "You used to call me Runt."

"Oh yeah," Thor says thoughtfully. He did do that.

"You had me sneak beers for you. I cleaned your dirtbike."

Memories come back to Thor in a rush: Loki, peering down from behind the upstairs banister as Thor careened through the front door with his friends. Loki, sweeping the floors and dusting furniture in their living room. Loki with that filthy horsie plush toy he'd drag everywhere. Loki like a little shadow, quiet and watchful, careful not to make trouble, careful not to draw attention to himself. Thor had almost entirely forgotten about him in the twelve years since he's been gone.

"Sounds kinda like I was an asshole."

Loki smiles. "More like a big brother, I guess. I used to like to think of you that way."

"*Pft.*"

"It's true! I used to pretend the four of us were a family. I mean, I knew Odin wasn't my dad, and I knew, somehow, he was the boss of my mom and I. But I guess I thought that's just what families were like." Loki's smile fades, and his gaze becomes faraway, even wistful. "Sometimes I think...those were the best days of my life."

Thor makes a face that can only be described as *yikes*. "That's bleak, man."

Loki's eyes come back into sharp focus, narrowing in at Thor. "You don't know what it's like for people like us. We know when we've got a good thing going. We don't take it for granted."

"People like you," Thor echoes.

Loki makes a face: *you know what I mean*. "Like my mom and me. Sex workers. I don't remember

who my mom was with before Odin, but trust me, she was glad to have him. When he died she cried for three days."

"Because she knew she'd have to leave."

"She loved him," Loki says forcefully. "That's why she stayed. She knew damn well how deep in debt he was, that she wouldn't get a *cent* from his estate. Yeah. You think that's stupid. You think sex workers don't have feelings? That we don't sometimes genuinely care for our johns, our daddies, our pimps?" Loki's voice becomes thick. "Believe it or not, sometimes it's not about the money. Sometimes it's nice just to feel like someone wants you."

Thor shifts uncomfortably in his folding chair, making it squeak under his weight.

"I think he loved her too," is what Thor ultimately says. It's the truth, as far as Thor knows. "She was a nice lady. I always thought so. She was always kind to me, even when sometimes I wasn't that kind to her."

Thor regrets the way he'd acted towards her in those early years. He was a moody teenager, resentful of this strange woman foisted upon him, and embarrassed that his much older father was keeping a sex worker so far below their caste. She'd won Thor over, eventually, with her outpouring of helpfulness - not quite a mother figure, but an approximation of one. She was always willing to whip Thor up something to eat, and quick to pick up after him. She was pretty in the way that Loki is pretty, but there was a rough edge to her owing to the hard living intrinsic to her trade and the pill problem that she was never able to shake, that Odin always turned a blind eye to.

Thor goes on: "I wish Odin was able to leave her with something. A bit of money. Or the car."

"Well, he didn't," Loki says neutrally. "And even if he did, what's to stop some distant relative from coming out of the woodwork and taking it away from us? We have no rights. No protection. My mom wasn't his wife. She wasn't owed anything. Our keep was our pay." Loki looks away with a glower. "Then people complain that sex workers are thieves, that we can't be trusted. Maybe if we had other means of supporting ourselves we wouldn't have to resort to stealing. I'd rather steal than get in a strange john's car."

"Yeah," Thor agrees, dumbly.

Loki inflicts that stare on him. "I want you to know that on our way out we raided the house. We

took whatever we could. Whatever was worth selling." Loki says this like a challenge, like he's daring Thor to be mad. Thor merely shrugs; sounds more than fair to him. As if he'd care about any of the shit he'd left behind so long ago.

"Including your mom's engagement ring," Loki adds. "Even though before he died Odin specified it should go to you."

Thor snorts. "Well, that was stupid of him. You'd have never found me."

"Yeah. That's what my mom said too," Loki says, pensive. "She really did think you were dead..."

"You don't gotta keep justifying it, Loki, Jesus. You needed the money. If Odin had done more to provide for you you wouldn't have had to resort to pawning his shit. And anyway, it's just a ring. It's not like I could've gotten any use out of it."

"Not just that," Loki goes on. "Your mom's pearls, and her gold earrings too. And your baseball."

"My baseball." Thor repeats. It had been his most prized possession as a kid. It had a few players' signatures on it. Nobody of note, but Thor thought for sure it would one day be worth a million dollars.

"I tried saving it for you," Loki says miserably. "I didn't think you were dead."

Thor is oddly touched by that. That Loki, newly homeless, would think to do that for him, not even knowing for certain whether he were dead or alive.

"But we couldn't keep it. We had to pack light. My mom didn't even get very much for it."

"I bet," says Thor. "Like fifty bucks?"

"Twenty."

"Ouch," chuckles Thor - so much for his childhood dreams. Little wonder that the market for such

tchotchkes is in the shitter these days. "Well, whatever. I'd have done the same if I were in her shoes, out on the street with a kid to feed."

Loki shakes his head. His face scrunches up.

"She used it to buy pills."

Loki starts to cry. Thor just sits there not knowing what to do or say or where to put his hands.

"I know what my mom was," Loki says, his breath hitching. He mops his face with his sleeve. "She loved your dad, mourned him, but the reality was that she had to work, and the only way she could stand to do that was if she was high."

He says this like he expects Thor to pass judgement, or to feel betrayed on his dead father's behalf. Thor does neither.

"We all gotta eat," Thor says gently.

Loki's breath is wheezy. He takes his inhaler out of his pocket and takes a puff.

"She made mistakes but she did her best. She suffered a lot. It makes me so sad when I think about it," Loki says, and he *looks* sad. God, he can look sad. "She wanted better for me. She didn't want me to have to follow in her footsteps..."

Loki's voice trails off and he goes quiet, aside from the occasional hitch in his breathing.

"You want to hear something *really* stupid?" Loki resumes, after he'd calmed down somewhat. "I got a stupider dream than you."

"No dream is stupid," says Thor, mostly because he's desperate for a change of subject - any subject will do.

"This one is. You ready for this? I wanted to be a magician. Dumb, right? I saw one once in a

theatre. I thought it was the most amazing thing. That's when I started practicing. I watched videos. I studied books, mostly the pictures."

"You're very good," says Thor honestly.

"Well, I ain't filling no stadiums anytime soon. The guy I saw, he made birds appear. He teleported his assistant. It was incredible. Obviously I am on more of a budget. But there's a lot you can do with regular playing cards, coins, things like that."

"There's still time," Thor teases, lamely - a poor attempt at a joke.

A plaintive smile settles on Loki's face. "To headline a stadium? Yeah, I'll get right on it. You gotta be my assistant, though. Wear the sequin costume and everything."

"Deal," Thor agrees, so readily it makes Loki laugh - a bray, made a tinge hysterical from the fact that Loki had been crying mere moments before. Thor likes it when Loki laughs, so he adds: "I'm told I look very fetching in red."

Loki has to wipe at his nose with his sleeve. "You in a sequin leotard. That'll put butts in seats for sure."

"More like scare your audience away. I thought assistants were supposed to be pretty."

"You're pretty," says Loki.

Thor snorts. "Thanks."

"The real problem would be trying to make an assistant of your general dimensions disappear. You're not exactly a hundred pound woman. I suppose I'd have to make it work. I like the gimmick."

"You know, if I'm going to be your assistant, you'd have to let me in on your tricks," Thor teases gently.

“Who says it's a trick? Maybe I really am magic.”

"Yeah? You think you could magic us outta here?" Thor mutters into his whiskey glass as he downs another shot. Another piss poor joke which he immediately regrets. Loki's smile fades, and Thor kicks himself. He really should think before he says things.

"So, uh. Tell me your magician name," Thor backtracks. "Loki the Magnificent?"

Loki scowls. "I *told you* it was stupid. You don't have to make fun of me."

"I'm not," Thor says, jostling his arm. "I'm not. I think it's cool. You're really good. I bet you could go to the canteen and earn sixty credits if you did that for the guys there."

This idea is a bad one. Thor knows Loki is intimidated by the soldiers, and probably with good reason. Loki would never step foot in the canteen if he could help it.

But then Loki surprises him by saying: "I did some busking up in ██████████."

Thor is taken aback. "Really?" It sounds so out of character for Loki, who Thor remembers as being almost painfully shy. Loki seems like the last person who'd want to be the centre of attention.

"Or at least, I tried. Out on the strip for the partygoers, by the beach. Could make some decent bank if the crowds were in a good mood and you weren't infringing on someone else's turf." He shrugs. "Then I learned it's easier to turn tricks than do tricks."

Thor flinches visibly at this. It doesn't escape Loki's notice.

"It makes you uncomfortable when I say things like that," Loki says. "I don't know why it should. You know what I am. Everyone does. Probably says right in my file."

“No, not at all,” Thor manages. “I mean, yeah, it does - say that - but it doesn’t bother me. It’s just...”

“It’s just what.”

“It’s just. Well. You were such a sweet innocent kid once.”

Loki's stare does not waver. "What's your point."

"The point?" Thor blinks. "There is no point. Just an observation."

Loki keeps staring at him in his characteristic unsettling way. It's almost like he enjoys making Thor squirm.

“Okay! Okay. The point is, I'm a dickhead. I get it. What I wanted to say, what I was *trying* to say, is whatever you’ve done, whatever you’ve had to do, that’s just - that’s just survival. I'm not gonna judge you for it.”

"It's not your judgement I'm afraid of," says Loki sullenly. "It's the way you look at me sometimes. Like I'm ...damaged."

"Aren't you?" Thor says, as kindly as he can.

Loki huffs out a bitter little laugh. "So damaged you don't want to sleep with me." He stands up and tosses the deck of cards on the table. "I'm going to bed. Do you want to use the bathroom first?"

Thor shakes his head dumbly.

"Okay. Thanks for the drinks."

Loki is in bed, seemingly asleep, by the time Thor climbs in. Thor’s mind is racing, despite all the alcohol he'd imbibed.

He is stuck on that baffling comment.

Does Loki want Thor to sleep with him?

Thor can't imagine why he would. Maybe he does like it? That seems unfathomable to Thor.

Maybe he feels he has to. It's ostensibly his purpose here. Thor doesn't want him to feel obliged, but at the same time -

Thor doesn't get the chance to ask, however, because the job comes through the following morning, and Thor is on the first helicopter flight out.

The job goes extremely well, all things considered, aside from a critical miscalculation by Grey, which Thor was luckily able to mitigate.

Black is so pleased, in fact, that there's a party waiting for the unit upon their return. Black treats them to his finest scotch, and his finest gin, and a bunch of other fine liquids Thor can't remember. They stay up into early morning, smoking cigars and snorting less discernible substances. Black even gets a few brothel workers to come join the festivities. Thor watches two of them dance together provocatively to blaring techno music. They must be glad just to be getting some drugs out of this.

“If you want one, it’s on me,” says Black, nudging Thor in the ribs and gesturing at the girls. “Or two.”

There was once a time when Thor would have eagerly taken up Black’s offer. Thor was a younger man once, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't partially get into this line of work for the pussy. That was back when he thought any pussy was good pussy - even if it was bought or coerced.

This time, however, Thor only shakes his head. His vision swims. “I should - be getting home.”

Black’s dark eyes glint. ”Yeah, why don't you go keep your boy company. He must be lonely for you.”

It is in this state that Thor lurches into his cabin.

"Honey I'm home," Thor says, and laughs uproariously at his own joke. Loki immediately appears in the doorway of the bedroom, looking rumpled and fragile.

“I’m back,” Thor tells him, as if it wasn't obvious, and begins to struggle to get his boots off. He keeps one hand on the wall for balance, although it doesn't much help and he staggers on his feet. He laughs again, this time at his own poor coordination. “Didja miss me?”

Loki's arms cross over his chest. "I was so worried."

"Worried," Thor says dreamily. “That's nice."

“It’s been two weeks. I hadn’t heard from you.”

“And you missed me.”

Loki’s shoulders lose their defensive edge. “Yeah,” he exhales. “Yeah, I missed you.”

“I would’ve sent word but...you know how it is,” Thor says, even though Loki can't possibly know anything about what *it* is Thor does. “Aw, don’t be mad. I’m here now, aren’t I? In one piece.

Mostly."

Thor gives up on getting his boots off.

"Do you want to hear something funny," Thor says conspiratorily, "It's my birthday."

Loki is not cajoled. "That's not funny."

Thor shakes his head. "What's funny, is, Black got me a fucking cake. A *chocolate* cake. How, I don't know. And the funniest thing of all? It hurts my teeth to eat it." From out of his coat pocket Thor pulls a hunk of cake wrapped in paper napkins. "I saved you some, though. Sorry it's a little mushed."

Thor extends his offering in Loki's direction, and Loki's face slackens. He's *stunned*, as Thor knew he would be. And Thor revels in it.

"I thought...maybe it would help you remember."

Loki looks at him. "What?"

Thor grins lopsidedly, utterly pleased with himself. "What chocolate tastes like."

Loki takes it reverently, like a treasure, which Thor supposes it is. And, without further ado, he devours it like he'd been waiting to do so his entire life.

"Good?"

Loki makes a humming noise in the affirmative as he closes his eyes in bliss. It makes Thor sad, suddenly, that this is not something he can regularly treat Loki to.

Loki pauses before finishing the last morsel. He has a hunk of cake on his teeth. "You sure you don't want any?"

Thor shakes his head no.

Loki finishes the last bite and sets about licking the residual buttercream off the napkin. Thor watches his little pink tongue work. He'd eaten the cake so fast that there's a smudge of icing on his upper lip, which Thor brushes away with his thumb.

Curiously, Thor presses his thumb to Loki's lips. Loki pauses a moment, his eyes flickering to Thor's. Then he darts his tongue out to lick it off, as Thor hoped he would. The feeling of Loki's warm, wet tongue on the pad of his thumb is enough to make Thor's dick twitch.

"Do you forgive me?"

Loki sort of shrugs. He doesn't outwardly appear mad anymore, at least.

Thor realizes, belatedly, that he's got Loki crowded against the kitchen wall, though he can't say how or when that happened.

"I missed you," Thor says huskily, nuzzling Loki's neck. It has been so long since he's had this: closeness. Intimacy. He so desperately craves a gentle touch. A touch that isn't violent.

Thor pulls back to take Loki's face in his hands. Loki stares back at him, wide-eyed yet steady. His breath is chocolaty and sweet, coming out in pants from barely parted lips.

"You have the most oddly coloured eyes...I've always thought so."

Loki swallows. Thor tracks his adam's apple as it bobs. That makes him notice Loki's throat, which is long and elegant. It looks like it would fit neatly in the palm of Thor's hand.

It occurs to Thor, viscerally, that he could fuck Loki if he wanted. He has no doubt Loki would let him. Loki would suck him off, too, if Thor would only ask. Loki would do anything for him.

Just like always.

"Thor....?" Loki's voice sounds distant, as if he's speaking through a wall.

"I need....to go to bed," Thor says, backing up, and suddenly feeling very confused. He trips on his partially untied bootlace and falls backward, though he manages to keep upright by catching himself on the table. He plops himself down on a chair, hoping that would make his blurring vision settle. Was his body always this heavy? Seems like it isn't usually this heavy.

Thor hears Loki sigh as he comes over. Loki crouches down at Thor's feet and slips off Thor's boots, first the left then the right.

"Your birthday's in August," Loki says quietly. "August eleventh."

"Thor's birthday is," Thor slurs. "Red's is today." Thor pauses a minute, then starts to laugh. "You remembered my birthday?"

Loki stands up primly. "Come on, let's get you in bed." With one of Thor's arms slung over his shoulders, Loki hoists Thor to his feet and steers him towards the bedroom. This is about all Thor remembers, because as soon as he lands on the bed he passes out cold.

Thor awakes alone at about ten the following morning. Loki is long gone to the laundry.

Thor has the day off, which is just as well because he's hungover. He's getting too goddamn old for this shit. Thor hasn't much to do besides lie around and feel awful. He has a few paperbacks under his bed, but none of them hold any appeal, and the tiny print would only exacerbate his headache anyway. He dozes, getting up only to shower.

By the afternoon he feels well enough to do some light repair work around the cabin. He plasters up the cracks in the drywall as he sings along to the tinny sound of his radio. He finds himself watching the clock, waiting for Loki to come home.

Then Thor does something strange. He goes to the bathroom and tidies his hair into a neat ponytail at the base of his neck. Next he trims his beard, which had grown out over the course of the last two weeks. He inspects himself. He's not bad looking, overall. But he feels old, even at thirty two.

Hard living has grizzled him.

A thought strikes him: is Loki even into men?

Then a more vexing thought: *Am I?*

Loki returns smelling like laundry soap. He's got a canvas bag slung over his shoulder bulging with goods from the commissary: onions, beans, potatoes, butter and ground meat, probably pork. The red ribbon is tied neatly around his upper arm.

"Hey," Thor says, bolting upright.

"Hey."

Thor takes the bag off Loki's shoulders. "Let me get that."

Loki shakes his limbs out and starts unzipping his jacket. Thor makes a vague gesture towards the ribbon on his arm. "Has anyone been hassling you while I was gone?"

Loki shakes his head. "Not really."

"Not really?"

"No."

"You can tell me if they are."

"They aren't." Loki notices Thor's work. "You patched the walls."

"Yeah. It'll help keep the heat in." Thor scratches at the crumbling plaster with his nail. "I'll sand it down and repaint it once it's dry. It'll be nice."

Loki is not as impressed by Thor's handiwork as Thor had envisioned. He's quiet as he puts away their groceries. Quieter than usual.

"So," Thor clears his throat. He realizes, belatedly, that they haven't really spoken since before he'd left. "Uh, how's it been lately?"

"Fine."

"What have you been up to?"

"Laundry," Loki replies curtly without turning around. "Same as always."

"Okay," says Thor. "Did you do anything fun?"

"What's there to do that's fun in this place."

"I dunno," says Thor, awkwardly. "Uh, what about Sigryn?"

"What about her."

"How is she?"

"How would I know."

"You two are friends, right?"

"I guess," says Loki.

"Well, have you talked to her lately?"

“No.”

“You should invite her over, maybe,” Thor suggests. “Show off your magic tricks. Bet she’d like that.”

Loki says nothing. He finishes putting away the groceries and starts pulling out pans and a cutting board.

Thor scratches the back of his neck. This isn't quite the way he'd pictured their reunion going in his head.

“So, uh. Funny thing about chocolate huh? Guess there is some left in the world. I can try to get you more, if you’d like. Might have to wait until my next birthday though. A-ha.”

Loki does not react to this, either. It’s like he isn't even listening.

Thor narrows his eyes. “Do we have a problem or something?”

Loki whirls around. His face is furious, so much so Thor is taken aback. He’s never seen Loki angry before, let alone as enraged as this.

"No, Thor. *We* don't got a problem. *I* got a problem. You."

"Me?"

"Do you just pick up and leave like that? Make off in the night with hardly a goodbye?" Loki’s face contorts. “I didn't know where you'd gone, when you'd be back. I didn’t know if you were even alive. I made myself *sick*, worrying after you. Then you barge in here, making small talk, as if the last two weeks hadn’t happened. *How’s Sigryn. Show off your magic tricks.* You know what, Thor? You know what’s fucking funny? There is no greater disappearing trick than the one you pulled on me.”

"I'm sorry, Loki," Thor stammers, and he means it. "It's just... how it is sometimes."

"You couldn't take two minutes to contact me?" Loki points to their wall phone, then holds up his pointer and middle fingers in a V. "*Two minutes.*"

"That line is for internal calls only. I said I was sorry!"

Loki's eyes narrow. "What is it that you do, anyway? That you disappear for two weeks without a trace?"

"You know what I do," Thor says, stilted. "I'm a - I'm a soldier."

"A *soldier*," Loki sneers. "What does that even mean. Do you kill people?"

It goes quiet for a minute. All that can be heard is the constant, maddening *tick-tick-tick* of the wall clock.

Loki's voice is hushed. "How many?"

"I don't know; how many guys have you fucked?" Thor returns acidly. Loki is stunned at first, then his face morphs to hurt, and Thor immediately feels like a piece of shit.

"Look. I don't know how many guys I've killed. I just do as I'm told. That's not really an excuse, but that's my explanation."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me," Thor snaps. "I'm not a complete monster. I do what I have to do to survive. It's not like I'm proud of it. I'm not proud that I'm complicit in this." Thor squares his shoulders defensively. "And anyway, who are you to question anything I do? I don't owe you *shit*. Not a phone call. Not a goodbye. Not an explanation. You wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for me!"

Loki's jaw clenches. "No," he says evenly. "I wouldn't. I'd be on the Rig. I'd be a Rig Pig's bitch. Right? That's what you said?"

Thor huffs. He should have never said that.

"Yeah, well. Aren't you glad you're my bitch instead."

Loki does not take the bait as Thor had hoped. His face twists, accusatory. "You *know* what would've happened to me out there. Admit it. You keep trying to brush it off but I know that you know."

"I wouldn't," Thor points his finger in Loki's face, "Go down that road, if I were you."

"Or what? You'll hit me? I can take it." Loki shoves Thor in the chest. "Come on, rough me up. You're the man of the house, right? Big tough soldier?"

"Loki...." Thor warns, though he doesn't retaliate.

"You won't," says Loki, tilting up his head. "You wouldn't put your hands on me."

Thor keeps his voice low and measured. "You don't know that."

Loki is unafraid. In fact his face turns soft. And he does something startling: he cups Thor's cheek with his hand. Up close, Thor can see that his eyes are wet. His tenderness is more disarming than if he'd physically lashed out.

"I want you to know you can talk to me. About your work here...about the Rig. I'm not gonna think less of you. I know you're just trying to survive. You're - you're *suffering*. I want to be able to help-

Thor snarls, pushing Loki away. "Enough. We are not discussing this." He points at the sack of groceries. "Get dinner going. I need a smoke."

Loki surges forward and blocks the doorway.

"Get out of the way."

"No."

"I said, get *out of my way*."

Loki doesn't stand down. "Not until you tell me what the Rig is!"

Thor's nostrils flare as he breathes deep and weighs his options. None of them are ideal.

What Thor ends up doing is grabbing Loki. This time Loki might've been expecting it, and he struggles, but his thrashing is futile against Thor's trained hold.

"*Let go of me*. What are you doing? Thor-"

Thor couldn't even say what it is he's doing until he sees the latch to the cellar, and all at once it comes to him. As if on autopilot, he drags Loki across the kitchen and kicks the hatch door open with his boot. When Loki realizes what's happening he struggles harder, upturning several chairs, but he's long-limbed and clumsy, and Thor's grip on him is unyielding. With some difficulty Thor half lowers, half forces Loki down through the hatch. Loki is dropped the rest of the way, and he lands with an *oomph* on the cellar floor. Before Loki is able to scramble back up the ladder, Thor slams the hatch door closed and locks the latch.

Almost at once, there are raps coming from the other side of the door. From below comes Loki's muffled voice. "Thor, I'm sorry. Please. Let me out. Thor...?"

Thor stands. His heartbeat is thumping so hard he can feel it pulsing in his chest. He backs away.

"Thor, please," comes Loki's voice. "Thor?"

Thor can't take it. He turns on his heels and flees.

He comes back later. The banging has stopped.

With a deep breath, Thor unlocks the latch and opens the hatch door. Thor is braced for Loki's rage, or tears, or...something. What he gets instead is an eerie silence.

"Are you ready to come out now?" Thor barks into the cellar.

Loki is sitting on the grubby floor with his knees curled into his chest. He peels himself off the ground, brushes the grime off his pants, and climbs the ladder.

"Next time I won't go easy on you," Thor tells him as Loki pulls himself onto the kitchen floor. Then, after a pause, "I *will* beat you, if that's what it'll take."

Loki seems neither threatened nor surprised by this. He stands up, goes to the sink, and calmly pours himself a glass of water, as if he hadn't been locked in a cellar for two and a half hours.

"I mean it," Thor says.

"Oh, I believe you," wheezes Loki, and downs the glass in one go. He moves towards the wall hooks where his coat is hanging, fishes out his inhaler from the pocket, and takes a puff on it. "You can rest easy. I'm done prying. Whatever *it* is that goes on out there, it must be truly terrible for you to resort to this - scaring me into not asking questions."

At Thor's dumbstruck face Loki continues: "You think I can't tell what it is you're doing? I may not know how to read or write but I know *people*. You're not as complicated as you'd like to think. And I know this: you're afraid of the Rig. You've been living under its shadow for what - *years*? You're afraid one misstep will put you on the next boat out there. That's why you won't go against orders. That's why you do all their dirty work."

Thor grits his teeth so hard they hurt. "That won't happen."

Loki glances at him dubiously. "You know, Thor, I can learn to live with you keeping secrets from me. But what I can't take, is having you lie to me." His face melts into that aching, sympathetic look again. "You're trying to protect me from it - from knowing what *it* is. You're bearing this burden on your own. And you won't let me help you."

Thor bristles. "I don't need your *help*."

Loki sighs tiredly. "Of course not. You don't need a damn thing from me, do you. You're managing just fine on your own, with your drinking problem and your night terrors."

Thor's mouth gapes. *Drinking problem?*

...Night Terrors ..?

Thor recovers: "So you're a therapist now, huh? Got me *all* figured out. Well, congratulations. I'm sorry to tell you, there is nothing you can do to help me. Christ. You can't even help yourself."

Loki looks him straight in the eye. "You're right. I can't."

He holds Thor like that, pinned under his searing, unwavering stare, for several long seconds until finally he looks away. "Well, you might be too proud to come out and say it but I'm not. I'm scared. I'm so fucking scared. I hate that it's out there, that I have to look at it....I hate that some days, some days I swear, it seems like you can *smell* the fumes coming off it..."

"You're not going anywhere, Loki, I told you. You're a Compound worker now. They can't take you away."

Loki's eyes flash. "And what if you go on one of these mystery assignments and get yourself killed? Hm? What would happen to me then?"

Thor's mouth opens but nothing comes out.

"I'll make arrangements. I'll find someone to place you with," Thor eventually says, even though he can't think of anyone who'd want Loki, especially since there'd still be so many debt-years

owed on him. "Just...calm down, okay."

"Don't tell me to be calm," Loki snarls. "If you die, I go to the Rig. Just say it."

"I promise I won't let that happen."

"You say that as if you weren't just as much a prisoner of this place as I am," Loki accuses.

Thor grips him by the shoulders. "You have to understand," he says evenly, "Doing the work is the way out. That means going on assignment. Executing orders to the best of my ability. I make myself valuable to them - that's how I stay safe. One more promotion and I'll be made a Captain, and I'd be working directly under Boss White. I know Black's considering nominating me for it. We'd be moved off-Compound, away from this."

Loki laughs, a hysterical sound. "*That's* your plan? Doing the work? Gaining rank? Thor, this place is *killing you*. How much longer can you keep this up? How can you live with yourself?"

"I don't have any other choice!" Thor yells, right into Loki's wide-eyed face. Thor feels himself crack, and his own terror spews forth like vomit he can't keep down: "You want to hear my plan? My actual, brilliant, oh-so-clever plan? If you hadn't come along I was going to shoot myself in the head. Yeah. Not the ending I deserve, but the one most within my reach. At least then, I wouldn't have to be a part of this. I could rob them of my owed years of service. But I can't do that now. If I kill myself they'll surely take you. So I'm not sure what you'd have me do instead. If you have any suggestions, I'd be happy to hear them."

Loki is quiet as he soaks this in. At a loss, probably.

"I'm sorry," Loki eventually says. His voice is softer than Thor has ever heard it.

Thor merely shrugs. "Maybe it's for the best that I wasn't able to work up the nerve to do it. At least I managed to save you, right? You and Jane. That's two out of.....thousands."

To Thor's embarrassment, he feels his eyes well. Loki approaches, looking to comfort, but Thor only growls and pushes him away. He can't take Loki's sympathy - not now. Not after what Thor had just put him through.

“Don’t pity me, for Christ’s sake. *I* did this to myself. *I* ran away from home. *I* wanted to be a big shot. And look what I have to show for it. A mouthful of rotten teeth. This fucking *shack*.” He punctuates this with a solid kick to the walls, causing a dent in his freshly touched up plaster. “This is all I know. This is - this is all I’m good at. I can’t escape it. I’m not sure I should be able to. I’m an evil man. I belong in this evil place.”

Thor exhales deeply. He wishes he hadn’t blurted that out all at once. Loki looks bewildered. Thor would be too, if he was the one who’d been unloaded on like that.

“I’m going out for a smoke,” is all Thor can think to say. “Please don’t follow me.”

To Thor’s relief, Loki doesn’t. Outside, alone and in the darkness, Thor allows himself one small mercy: to cry. He mourns Jane; he mourns his son. He mourns the life he and Loki might’ve had had they never become entangled in this mess. Most of all, he mourns each and every innocent life who has had the fatal misfortune of passing through the Compound’s cursed gates.

Later, exhausted and wrung out, Thor slips into bed. Loki’s already in it, but Thor can tell he isn’t asleep. They lay side by side, neither knowing what to say to the other.

Thor is the one who breaks the silence. There is only one piece of practical advice he can think to offer:

“If something should happen to me, climb the fence. The guard towers shoot to kill. Do it immediately. Before they come for you.”

Black is still tickled about the outcome of the job, despite Grey’s mistake. Thor knows this because he doesn’t usually drink during the day. He must still be feeling celebratory.

“You’re going to have to take care of this,” he says, handing Thor a signed document with one hand and taking a sip of his scotch with the other.

Thor scans the page cursorily. Its contents do not surprise him.

“Looks like a new Commander position has opened up,” Black says. “Any thoughts?”

Thor shakes his head. “I’d have to review his unit.”

Black makes a face. “They all underperform. Draw from Blue’s. Scope them out and report to me by next Friday.”

Thor nods and tucks the order in his jacket pocket.

“You though -” Black says, gesturing with his glass. “You’re really turning out to be somethin’ special. You keep this up and hell - you’ll be amazed how far you go.” Black grins broadly, in that peculiar way of his. “I’ll be sure to send my commendations to White.”

Black claps his shoulder and Thor is excused. As he’s exiting through the back foyer Thor comes upon Loki, who is struggling with what appears to be several sacks of dirty laundry. Loki looks as startled as Thor is. They’ve never crossed paths during the day.

"What are you doing here?" Thor hisses, marching up to him.

Loki stares back at him. "I always collect from Central Block."

“Since when?”

Loki's eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. “Since always.”

“I can't help you with that," Thor tells him, gesturing to the sacks.

"I'll manage.”

It's then that Black steps out, stumbling upon them both. His eyes glint, as they do when he puts two and two together.

"I thought I heard voices!" He exclaims as he comes towards them. "That's the boy, innit?"

"Yeah," Thor is forced to acknowledge.

Black waves Loki forward. "C'mere sweetheart. I've been wondering about you. Let's have a looksie."

Loki approaches with a blank face. His eyes, however, are guarded. Vigilant.

"So you're the new wife eh," Black muses. He grips Loki by the chin, which Loki allows complacently. Black turns to Thor with his eyebrows raised. "Pretty for a boy!"

"Yeah," says Thor. He feels his nails dig into the palms of his hands.

"What unusual eyes. Never seen a 'em a colour like that. Very striking...Have I seen you before?"

Loki's voice is barely audible. "I don't think so, sir."

Black hums thoughtfully. "Red's a good man, the best. Been treating him nicely?"

"I try, sir."

Black is amused, clearly, by this whole situation. "You like him too? He's a handsome fella. Handsomer than most, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," answers Loki.

"Why don't you give him a little kiss?"

"Sir-" Thor interjects.

Black shuts Thor up with a flippant wave of his hand. "Go on, love. Give your soldier a kiss."

Thor is paralyzed in his boots as Loki approaches. Loki, meanwhile, looks calm, even....certain. Loki moves in close, takes Thor by the back of the neck, and pulls him in until their lips finally meet. Loki kisses him softly at first; little more than a press. Then, gently, Loki tugs Thor closer, coaxing him to part his lips and deepen the kiss. Loki's mouth is soft and lush and giving against Thor's, and when Loki licks into Thor's open mouth, Thor can do nothing but groan from deep in his throat. Nor does Thor resist when Loki touches his tongue to Thor's own. The feeling is strange, yet euphoric. Mesmerizing. Thor couldn't stop it even if he wanted to.

Thor is dizzy and breathless by the time it's over. He has never, ever been kissed like that.

Then Thor remembers Black is still here, still watching.

Black's eyes glimmer as he looks between the two of them. "I knew you had to be special, to turn Red off women. Something about you must've really.....piqued his interest."

He says this oddly, almost knowingly. But then, Black's always talks like he's got an ace in his sleeve.

Black continues: "You know, his first wife was quite pretty too. She was a laundress, like you. Red here wouldn't let her work in the Big House. They take a boy every once in a while. I'd refer you, if you like. Could earn a lot of credits that way. They can be...quite generous." There's a hint of suggestion in Black's voice as he turns on his heels to leave. "Think about it."

"I'm sorry about Black," Thor says, as he's lying in bed next to Loki that night. "He's a shithead. He thinks he's being funny. He thinks *this* is funny."

"What's funny."

"That I got you," Thor laughs awkwardly. "That I - I don't know. I'm gay now. That's funny to him, I guess."

Loki turns to look at him. "You're not, though. You like women."

"Yeah," Thor acknowledges. "But I like you too."

Thor doesn't know if it's appropriate to tell Loki he's a good kisser, or that Thor enjoyed it, or that Thor wouldn't say no to doing it again.

"Hey, Loki?"

"Yeah?"

"We're friends, right?" Thor asks, suddenly anxious, though he doesn't know why.

"Yeah," Loki says with a sigh. "We're friends."

"Okay, good. Just checking. I know I'm a dick to you sometimes. I'm a dick in general, though. It's not you-specific."

It goes quiet again. Off in the distance Thor can discern a few of the guard dogs barking.

"Hey Loki?"

"Yeah," comes the tired-sounding response.

Thor pauses, chewing on his lip. He debates whether he should say it. It sounds so stupid, even in his head. Loki will probably take it the wrong way.

"Nevermind."

Thor lays back, but the thought won't dissipate, like a splinter in his brain.

"Actually, I just wanted to say.... Loki, I - " Thor braces himself, "I'm glad you're here with me."

No response. Thor sighs and closes his eyes.

Then, after a beat, he feels his hand being sought out. Loki takes his hand in his, clasping it firmly, imparting a kind of quiet strength. Thor exhales shakily, and a strange fluttering sensation manifests in his stomach.

Emboldened, Thor gives Loki's hand a little squeeze.

And Loki -

Loki squeezes back.

"What did Black mean, working in the Big House?" Loki asks over breakfast the following morning.

Thor doesn't want to answer, but he can't think of a reason not to. "Boss White's mansion. Maid's work, so they say. But you know..." Thor's voice trails off. He doesn't need to elaborate; Loki can guess. "Black kept bugging me to send Jane but I wouldn't allow it."

Loki cocks an eyebrow. "Didn't want to share?"

Thor's eyes flash. "I promised her that as my wife she'd never have to sleep with anyone but me. And I kept that promise. That's why she worked in the laundry." Thor pauses, then blurts out: "She

wasn't a sex worker. Not before she got here. She was....educated."

He and Jane had their differences but Thor always respected her. She had so much potential. She was brilliant, ambitious, the quintessential high-achieving type A personality. The kind of person could have done something to fix the world. But instead she was stuck here, penned in with Thor, working in a laundry, known only as his live-in sex worker. No wonder she was so resentful.

"Even if she was a sex worker, I couldn't....I couldn't ask her to do that."

Loki is watching him carefully. "I don't mind. I'd do it. We need the credits."

Thor immediately feels uneasy. "Loki..."

"Why not? I'm not an innocent little kid anymore, Thor. *I am* a whore. This is what I do."

Thor winces. "Don't say that."

"It's true, isn't it?" Loki puts his hand on Thor's forearm. His smile is soft. "Let me do this. I want to."

"Why?"

"Because. Meds cost. Food costs. Fuel costs. I don't want you to have to ration propane or pain meds. And...I was never able to thank you. For saving me."

"You've thanked me, Loki."

Loki goes quiet, and his eyes become distant. He smiles a strange, sad little smile, as if to himself.

"I won't go if you tell me not to. But if I do...you have to promise you'll not treat me any different. And you have to promise me you'll quit smoking! I hate that you smoke."

Thor doesn't like it, not at all, but Loki seems determined. He's not wrong when he says they need the credits.

"You gotta promise me something in return - if it's bad, you stop. You never go again. Okay? Promise me Loki. We don't need credits that bad. We can....we'll figure it out."

Loki nods. That strange little smile is back.

"I promise."

Black makes the arrangements with surprising haste. They're in need of laborers in the Big House, it turns out. Even menial ones like Loki are in high demand. There's no way of telling, however, whether Loki will catch someone's eye at all. If he's being honest, Thor hopes he won't. This is because Thor personally doesn't know White; he'd only seen him in passing, and they've never exchanged words. He can only imagine the kind of man White is, given the kind of operation he's running.

"You don't have to do this," Thor whispers. "You can still change your mind."

Loki slings his overnight bag over his shoulders. "I know."

The Compound's gates rattle open, drawing both their attention: it's the shuttle bus. The other laborers milling about start to gather their things.

Thor feels frantic. "Don't antagonize. Don't back talk."

"I can handle it," Loki assures him with a smile. He seems calm; serene even. Thor, meanwhile, feels like he's on the verge of an anxiety attack.

"Well," Loki says, eyeing the shuttle. "Goodbye, I guess."

The other soldiers in the yard are standing around, watching and whispering amongst themselves. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what's got them intrigued.

Thor used to be embarrassed that he had a male sex worker at home. He didn't want to advertise it. As silly as it seems, he didn't want to be made fun of. But that doesn't even cross his mind now. He takes Loki in his arms like he never wants to let him go.

"Be safe," Thor says into Loki's hair. "Please be safe."

When he finally pulls away, Loki is staring at him. His expression is unreadable.

"See you in a few days," says Loki.

"Yeah," swallows Thor. "See you."

At that, Loki makes his way towards the shuttle and boards it along with the other queued up laborers. Once all of them are checked off and accounted for, the shuttle's engines rev. It loops around in the yard and drives off back the way it came. The Compound's gates close behind it with a final-sounding *clunk*. Thor watches it until it is out of sight, even though he can't see Loki through its tinted windows.

Then, for one last time, Thor takes a cigarette out of his pack and lights up.

Grey's mistake was not taken lightly by Black.

"This is one way to get outta here," Grey jokes, shakily. "Probably the best way."

Thor doesn't say anything as he leads Grey through the Compound yard. Grey's arms are handcuffed behind his back; a needless precaution, since there isn't anywhere he could run, and

Thor doubts Grey would even try. Workers stop to watch them pass, but their eyes slide away when they realize where the pair of them are heading.

"Will you incinerate my body? Don't let them bring it to the Rig."

"It's already been arranged," Thor tells him.

Grey looks visibly relieved. He nods.

"I'm glad you're the one doing this, brother."

He says this because Thor is the Compound's best shot, and he's often personally requested to carry out the deed. Thor doesn't mind this as much as one would think, especially since this courtesy is extended only to soldiers, who, like Grey, probably deserved it in the first place. At least executing someone, Thor knows exactly what it is he's doing. He can look the condemned in the eye before he puts a bullet in their brain. He can give them the dignity of a clean death, instead of sending them out to that..... *thing*....

Grey stands with his back to the Wall without any prompting. He knows he had this coming. If Thor were in his place, he wouldn't put up any resistance either. The concrete behind him is scarred with bullet holes. No one ever goes near the Wall - unless it's for this.

Thor pulls out the sack he'd stuffed in his pocket. At the sight of it, Grey's breath comes out in rapid, panicked, cloudy pants.

"My name is Erik," Grey blurts out, so only Thor can hear. "Erik Pedersen."

It takes a few seconds for Thor to process this information. Then he says, "My name is Thor."

"Thor," Grey - *Erik* - repeats. "Thor, I need to tell you something. Something important."

Grey looks at his feet. His chest heaves once, twice. Thor wonders if he'll vomit.

“Jane didn't die from infection after her miscarriage. She was taken to the Rig.”

"What?" Thor breathes, unsure if he'd heard that correctly. But Grey is serious - deadly serious. How could he not be, at a time like this?

"That's *impossible*," Thor hisses. "I paid for her. I'm *still* paying for her."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Grey blabbers. "They found out about her degree."

"*How?*" Thor demands, incredulous, and stunned even to hear it from Grey's lips. He and Jane had never uttered a word of that to anyone. Not a soul. They had been *so careful* -

“The cabins are listening,” Grey whispers. “In the air vents. Kitchen and bedroom.”

Realization sinks in, and a leaden weight settles at the bottom of Thor’s stomach. Suddenly he sees things with new, awful clarity.

How could I have been so blind?

“I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm a coward. I should have told you sooner-”

Snarling, Thor stuffs the hood over Grey’s pleading head and shoves him up against the Wall. Thor takes a few paces backwards and unholsters his assault rifle. Thor’s aim is true, despite his blurring eyesight and the tremors wreaking his entire body. It's all over in a fraction of a second. One shot is all it takes for Grey’s body to crumple lifelessly to the ground.

Thor lowers his gun, feeling himself start to hyperventilate. His lungs contract painfully and he clutches his chest, though it doesn't do anything to slow the jackrabbit pace of his heart.

Jane. Oh, Jane.

Thor sinks to his knees and screams.

three of nine

Chapter Notes

Heads up: there is brief Loki/OC in this. It's not that dubconny, per se, but it's certainly...weird. I have clearly been smoking too much weed lately. Come with me down this drug induced rabbit hole.

Apologies for typos; I am unbeta'd.

tw: child abuse mention, suicide mention, mental illness.

"In all things that are mysterious, never explain." - hp lovecraft

Whatever Loki was expecting, it wasn't this.

He is taken to something like a mobile work camp, situated some two hours' drive from the Compound. The task appears to be shovelling rock to build an embankment. Teams of men are working away at this under the watchful eyes of armed guards. None of the men speak; Loki thinks at first this must be a camp rule. Then Loki works a day.

The work is both boring and gruelling. As soon as one pile of rock is worked through, another truck pulls into the lot. Loki's heart sinks every time a fresh dump of rock is unloaded. The highway ahead goes on interminably, even cruelly, with no end in sight. Loki's outer limbs are freezing and his inner shirt is soaked with sweat, making Loki clammy and uncomfortable. The site itself is a mucky mess from being churned underneath the workers' feet. Loki's new boots soon become caked with gunk.

They're fed bread and stew out of another mobile trailer. Loki knows objectively that the food is not good, but he shovels it down like an animal nonetheless. Loki downs his bitter black coffee with the same level of enthusiasm, just because it's hot. Now he sees why none of the men talk; they're too exhausted.

He's assigned a bed in one of the trailers alongside eleven other haggard, tired men. Loki sleeps like a stone and jerks awake at the banging of a cowbell.

By the end of the second day, the team had made enough progress that the entire mobile camp is moved up the highway. More rock, more rock, more rock.

On the third day, Loki wakes feeling so sore that he can hardly even haul himself out of bed. He's never been so cold, so hungry, so tired in his life, and that's saying something. Loki never thought he'd be missing the laundry, let alone the Compound. The only thing that gives him solace is the fact that they can't keep him here forever. He's a temporary labourer, which means that he'll be going back to the Compound at the end of the week. Back to the cabin he'll never take for granted again. Back to Thor.

On the fourth day, something happens.

It's sometime mid-morning and the sky is overcast and grey. Loki is fantasizing about hot showers and pizza when a Rolls Royce stops along the highway. The men look up and whisper amongst themselves until the guards bark at them to get on with it. It's hard not to stare. Loki has never seen a car like that in person before.

"21774."

Loki startles; it's one of the camp's overseers. He immediately apologizes and averts his eyes back to the pile of gravel at his feet.

But the overseer only says, "You're summoned," and gestures at the Rolls. Loki swallows tightly and sets down his shovel.

When Loki is close enough, the tinted back window rolls down, revealing a startlingly beautiful middle-aged woman in a cream peacoat. Her long, straight glossy black hair is tied back in a high, almost severe-looking ponytail.

"You're the one with the tattoo on your back?" She has a vague, European-sounding accent. Maybe Italien, or French.

Loki is so caught off guard he is rendered speechless.

"I - uh, yes."

"What do you do? Oral? Anal?"

Loki is further taken aback at the abrupt vulgar question. It sounds especially filthy coming out of her lush mouth, in her polished accent.

"Either," Loki says, barely above a whisper. "Both."

"How old are you?"

Loki's teeth chatter. He's *so* cold, so tired.

"How old do you want me to be."

The woman's face is unreactive. The window rolls up and the Rolls pulls away, leaving Loki standing there in a cloud of exhaust.

It's only much later, near twilight, when Loki is summoned by the labour camp's overseer and asked if he would like to earn some extra credits.

The Big House is a gated mansion, the most opulent private residence Loki has ever seen. Perched on a mountainside and surrounded by thick, deep forest, it almost seems like nature was built up around it, rather than vice versa. The surrounding wall goes farther than the eye can see and is topped with the same kind of cables that adorn the Compound's electrified fence. There are guard towers too, albeit much nicer-looking ones than the ones that dominate the Compound.

After being cleared by the checkpoint guards, Loki is led inside through a small ancillary door meant for staff. They search him perfunctorily and confiscate his small overnight duffle bag, although Loki is assured it would be returned to him on his way out. All Loki is left with is his inhaler, which they let him keep once he takes a demonstrative puff on it.

A frumpy man in a labcoat enters, followed by a by what looks like a couple of hospital workers.

“21774?” asks the man in the labcoat.

"Yes, sir."

Labcoat adjusts his spectacles on his nose as he gives Loki a once-over.

“Are you clean?”

He must mean of STIs, because Loki certainly isn't physically clean.

“I think so,” Loki says, although he can't really be sure.

“I'd like to take a swab,” Labcoat says. "I'm a doctor."

It wouldn't matter if he wasn't. Loki is committed to going through with this.

“Sure,” says Loki.

Labcoat takes him aside, dons a pair of latex gloves and swabs both his throat and then his privates. Loki allows this without any fuss. He's been tested plenty of times before, and Labcoat goes about it with more professionalism than Loki expects.

Afterwards, Loki is made to wait, presumably while they process the results. He must be clean, because when Labcoat comes back some twenty minutes later he says,

“Very good. Yes. Come along.”

Loki follows Labcoat deeper in the mansion, through the designated staff-areas and into the main body of the building. The orderlies trail behind, quiet and watchful.

At length, Loki is brought into the mansion's large, open foyer area.

"Wait here," says Labcoat as he disappears down a corridor, leaving Loki and the orderlies alone.

And so, Loki waits. He's sure his mouth gapes as he peers around. The foyer is several stories tall and dominated by an elegant curved staircase. The floor is polished marble. A crystal chandelier glitters overhead. It's so clean and bright it's physically disorientating, especially after having spent the last two months in the gloomily-hued Compound. Loki has never, ever been somewhere so fancy - not even at any of the parties he did with Sunny. No beaucrocat or official is this loaded. It makes Loki feel like a stain, like he's bringing the filth and stink of the Compound into this place. Besides which, he'd been working on that labour team for the better part of four days without a shower. He knows he looks like it, too.

Labcoat soon reemerges, and he's not alone. It's the woman from the Rolls. She's dressed in a tailored, tight crisp white pencil skirt and peplum top that accentuates her hourglass figure impeccably. Her center-parted hair hangs down her back, perfectly black and perfectly straight. She looks immaculate and untouchable; not a hair out of place. Loki feels even more filthy in comparison. It's funny - Loki has never been that attracted to women, but this woman is, objectively speaking, stunningly beautiful. It's a struggle not to stare at the creamy mounds of her breasts, which are very *up* and very *out*.

"The sex worker from the Compound, ma'am," says Labcoat.

Her high-heels click on the marble as she slinks over. When she nears, her nose scrunches up, just barely. She doesn't have to say or do anything more to convey the fact that Loki stinks.

"What pretty eyes you have," she muses. "Such an unusual shade of green..."

This is the same tired comment Loki has gotten his entire life.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"He'll like that," the man in the labcoat chimes in from behind her. "And the hair."

The woman doesn't acknowledge this. She doesn't take her eyes off Loki. "Why do you think you're here."

Loki has an inkling - there's only one thing he's good for, and their physical assessment of him hadn't done much to counter that idea. But he doesn't want to sound presumptuous. Loki shifts his weight on his feet back and forth.

"I'm here to do as I'm told?" he tries.

"Don't be obtuse. Answer plainly when I ask you a question."

Loki doesn't know what *obtuse* means, but he can guess.

"I'm, uh. Here to do sex work."

This seems to be a passable answer. It's eerie how she doesn't seem to blink. She has an almost feline quality to her.

"And are you a good sex worker?"

What a bizarre question. Being *good* has nothing to do with it. Loki does it because it's all he knows how to do.

"Um, pretty good, I guess."

"I do not like for my time to be wasted," the woman goes on. "I expect a good performance out of you, do you understand? Like in one of your videos."

For the second time, Loki is caught completely off guard. "My - what?"

"Your videos," she repeats, irritated. "Black told me about you."

So she knows. That must also be how she knew about his tattoo. How Black found out about all that, Loki has no idea.

"I'll do my best," Loki says quietly.

"Do your best to what?"

"To..." Loki's voice tapers off. Christ, she makes him nervous. He tries to determine what she wants him to say, but when he searches her face she has no tells. It's like talking to a robot.

"To bring your client to climax," she finishes for him, very slowly and emphatically. "Isn't that right."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll need a shower and a fresh change of clothes. I will supply you with both. Brush and floss your teeth. I also must insist that you shave all your body hair. And do *something* about those fingernails."

"Okay," whispers Loki.

She tilts her head. "Do you know who I am?"

"I - I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't."

She smiles at him then - the first expression Loki's seen on her, but it doesn't look natural. Only a curl of her plush lips, really. Her eyes are as black and bottomless as ever.

"My name is Mrs. White."

She signals to the men behind her. "We'll try him."

Loki needs no coaxing to get into the shower. The feeling of hot clean water on his grimy skin makes him want to cry. He hadn't had a proper long hot shower in months. It feels almost hedonistically good on his sore exhausted body. Loki takes his time scrubbing himself down and shampooing his hair, just to drag this part out a little longer. He shaves like he'd been told, and although Mrs. White hadn't specified to clean himself, Loki does this too, just in case.

Loki starts to really get nervous after he brushes his teeth. He wishes he had something to take the edge off - alcohol or pills or even just some weed. Sunny used to give him something to loosen his inhibitions before shoots. Loki doesn't know how this trick will play out and it makes him anxious. Sunny made it easy. Sunny would just tell him what to do and he'd do it. It was never *that* bad. Except-

"Calm," Loki says into the mirror. "Calm, calm."

He says it again and again until his heart rate begins to slow and his features are schooled back to neutrality. He retreats deep inside himself, where no one can touch him, hurt him, or degrade him. His body is a shell, devoid of meaning. This is harder to do without drugs as a crutch.

Loki reminds himself why he's doing this.

He takes a fortifying puff on his puffer, tucks it in his back pocket, and steps out of the bathroom.

Labcoat and the orderlies escort him to what looks like a service elevator. It surprises him even more when they go *down* and not up. And they go down for a lot longer than Loki expects.

"Try not to react," says Labcoat, as the elevator rumbles downward.

Loki looks at him. "Sorry?"

"Just - act normal."

He doesn't elaborate beyond that. Loki stares ahead and tries to ignore the very real sinking feeling in his stomach.

The elevator groans to a stop and the doors creak open, revealing a long, sterile-looking corridor.

“This way,” say Labcoat, and leads Loki down the hallway, turning this way and that until at last they reach a large, industrial-looking metal door. Labcoat scans the badge clipped to his lapel, and the door opens with an approving *beep*.

The first two things Loki notices is how brightly the room is lit and the dusty-pink color of the carpet. The smell of cleaner - of fake flowers and bleach - is so powerful it hits like a punch to the face. A large canopied hospital bed dominates one end of the room. There are shelves and shelves full of VHS tapes on the walls - more movies than a person could probably watch in ten years. *Twenty* years. What little wall space that isn't devoted to tapes is occupied by film posters, but they're all from old Hollywood movies which Loki doesn't recognize.

Then, at the centre of the room-

Loki inhales sharply.

There's a man sitting in an armchair in front of a television. Bald, pale, a jumble of teeth in his jaws, and a tongue so swollen and thick it stuffs his mouth. His skull is lopsided - caved in on one side and bulbous on the other, which makes it seem like one of his eyes is literally being squeezed out of his skull. Thick-looking fingers rest serenely on the chair's armrests. Beside him is a side table with what looks like a glass of orange juice and the television's remote.

Labcoat walks up to the man, curls over his recliner and speaks loudly and clearly, “Moo, this is Loki. He's here to try and extract a sample.”

Loki's horror crests when he realizes *this is the client*.

Labcoat steps back, but that's it. Loki realizes neither he nor the orderlies are going to leave. They're going to....watch?

"What are you waiting for," prompts Labcoat.

Loki is frozen in place, stunned. The man - creature - just wheezes at him, watching him calmly from his one good eye. The interest is there, Loki knows that much. Loki tries not to show how repulsed he feels.

"Um, how do you want me to do it."

Labcoat is jotting something down on his clipboard. Without looking up, in a clinical voice he says, "Start with fellatio and we'll see how it goes."

It's kind of funny that he says *we* when Loki will be the one doing all the fellating. Well, okay. If there's one thing Loki knows how to do, it's give head.

"Hi. I'm Loki," Loki says as he approaches, even though Labcoat has already said that.

The man says nothing. He doesn't move or give any indication of having understood anything that was told to him. He just sits there, benignly curious, drooling slightly from his tongue-stuffed mouth. Loki isn't sure if he can even talk.

Loki kneels at the foot of the man's recliner between his knobby knees. He notes, distantly, that the man is wearing Velcro-closed sneakers. Loki draws out his genitals from his sweatpants. The man allows this placidly, neither encouraging nor rebuffing. His penis is a purplish colour and seems almost underdeveloped. Or perhaps malformed.

Loki decides not to think; best to just go for it. He closes his eyes and wraps his lips around the man's flaccid dick. The entire thing fits easily in his mouth. It tastes more or less like any other dick Loki's ever sucked: salty, and also kind of sour. Loki starts slow, lapping at the head with his tongue, although he's too freaked out by this whole situation to pull out his best moves. The man's dick is not nearly large enough or hard enough to take down Loki's throat, and Loki can't bring himself to look up at who he's blowing. He just wants it to be over with as soon as possible.

Loki keeps going with this for a few minutes, but try as he might, he cannot get it hard. The man's dick lolls in Loki's mouth like a piece of limp rubber - kind of like trying to blow Mad Dog when he'd taken too much T.

Loki is encouraged when the man starts to sport a bit of a semi, so he redoubles his efforts, sucking noisily and bobbing his head. He can feel the man touching his hair, which Loki wishes he wouldn't.

After about ten minutes of trying, Loki can tell that this is going nowhere. The man can't get it up. It comes as no surprise when he finally pushes Loki's head away, probably oversensitive. Loki sits back on his heels and wipes his mouth.

"That's enough then," sighs Labcoat.

Getting paid is always an awkward thing to have to deal with. Usually Loki got the money upfront, or else Sunny would handle it for him. Then again, nothing about this trick was *usual*.

Loki is brought back upstairs to the mansion proper. This time he's led through the foyer to a magnificent library with a blazing fireplace and more books than Loki's ever seen in his life - more books than Moo has movies. In the corner is a marble statue of a nude woman, like one from Ancient Greece or Rome, except when Loki looks more closely he notices that the statue has its fingers tucked in the lips of its labia.

Mrs. White is also there, at an ornate mahogany desk. She looks up from whatever she's writing when Loki and Labcoat enter.

Labcoat says nothing; he only shakes his head. Mrs. White's lips curl downwards, but she does not seem overly surprised.

"Did he maintain an erection at all?"

Loki thinks. He knows what answer she *wants* him to give, but Loki doesn't want to risk lying to her, either.

"Um, a little."

She turns to her cheque book. She seems vaguely frustrated, as if the sight of Loki is already tedious.

"I think you'll find three hundred is more than generous," she says in a clipped tone. "I don't think I need to tell you that this is mostly for your discretion."

She finishes writing out the credit note and extends it to him with red-manicured fingertips. And although Loki itches to grab it and get the ever-loving fuck out of here, instead he swallows his nerve and says what he came here to say:

"With all due respect, ma'am, what I really need is a dentist."

She levels an incisive stare at him. "A dentist? A dentist for what?"

Loki swallows dryly. His mouth feels like sandpaper, and he can feel the tackiness as he talks. "For my soldier. His teeth hurt him."

"He sent you here for that?"

Loki shakes his head. "This was my own idea ma'am. I - I don't know who else to ask."

Her face is unreadable. It's eerie how she doesn't seem to blink.

"Please," Loki goes on. "There is no one in the Compound who can help him. He's in a lot of pain - I'm worried his teeth might be infected."

"Which one is he?"

"Red - Commander of the Red unit."

She merely hums at this. Loki isn't sure if this information means anything to her. If it does, it certainly doesn't mean very much. There are always more mercenaries, more workers, more conscripts. People are disposable.

“He’s a good soldier, loyal and hardworking,” Loki presses. “He’d be even better if his teeth weren’t distracting him. If he died from infection it would be a great loss to the outfit...”

Loki’s voice trails off as Mrs. White stands up and moves towards the other end of the library. There, she unlocks the combination wall safe. From it she pulls out an ivory-hilted revolver and points it straight at Loki. Loki audibly gasps and puts his hands in the air.

"I ought to shoot you for your insolence." she says coldly, with such conviction Loki has no doubt she’d follow through with it. "You dare to negotiate with me? What you're asking for is worth far more than whatever *services* you can provide. You think your little pussy is as tight as that?"

Loki is stunned, frozen in place.

"Do you?"

"No - no, ma'am."

"You aren't worth the three hundred credits I was going to pay you. You hardly even got him erect. I was hoping for something *more* than the miserable fuck you just gave. Did you even try?"

"I'm sorry. I was nervous," Loki says in a rush. Then, quietly: "He didn't really seem like he wanted to."

This was absolutely the wrong thing to say. Her beautiful face contorts in a snarl, and she brandishes her gun more emphatically.

"Is it not your job to instill desire? To *make* him want it? What else are you good for?"

"I can do better. I can do anything," Loki stammers, then tacks on his signature line: "I'm very open-minded."

This gives her pause. She tilts her head.

"What's your name again?"

Loki hadn't told her in the first place, but knows better than to point that out.

"It's Loki."

"Loki," she says, as if tasting the word. "He is monstrous, no? Did it not disgust you to have his hands on you?"

Loki has turned plenty of tricks that disgusted him. This was by far the strangest one, but it was certainly not Loki's worst.

"No more than most," Loki answers, tepid yet honest.

Mrs. White looks at him almost with amazement, as if Loki had done something so baffling it elicits a kind of morbid curiosity.

"You must really want it," she says, as if to herself. "Tell me this, Loki: why would a Compound whore, like you, come here and prostitute himself to get his soldier's teeth fixed."

"I owe him my life. I would've been sent to the Rig if it wasn't for him."

"Spare me. I know how the wives are treated down in the yard. Not one of them would so eagerly degrade themselves for their soldier's sake - whether they owe their lives to them or not. I'm going to ask you again," her voice is low and even, "Why are you here."

Loki's mouth opens. He's so shaken, so terrified that she'll actually pull the trigger, that what ends up falling out of him is the truth:

"He saved me from being raped when I was a child."

Loki's hands fly to his mouth, as if he could physically recant his confession. He's appalled that he blurted that out, but it *is* hard to think staring down the barrel of a gun.

Whatever Mrs. White was expecting, it wasn't *that*. Her head visibly recoils.

"What?"

Loki already feels his throat start to choke up. Stiffly, he moves his hands away from his face and forces himself to explain:

"I knew him, before. We were brothers once. Well - my mother was his father's kept woman. We were raised together."

Mrs. White is still staring at him. Then, abruptly, she starts to laugh, as melodic and airy as a songbird. Labcoat and the orderlies laugh too, as if to back her up. Loki feels his face heat; there's nothing about that that's funny to him.

"Brothers?" She echoes. "That doesn't make you *brothers*. That makes you the son of his father's whore."

Loki ducks his head. She's not wrong. He and Thor were never brothers. Not in name or in deed. Only in the verdant garden of Loki's imagination.

"Yes ma'am, that's true," Loki admits.

At last, she lowers the gun. She now seems more intrigued than outwardly hostile, and yet somehow no less malevolent.

"Leave us."

Her cronies exit the room, leaving the two of them alone. Mrs White moves towards him until she's close enough that Loki can smell the cedary spice of perfume. Her every motion is precise, not a single extraneous movement or gesture. Her high heels make her Loki's eye level, but she looms much larger, like a cat playing with a mouse.

"Ah, but you *wish* you were brothers, correct?" she goes on cruelly. She is clearly relishing humiliating Loki like this. Into the shell of Loki's ear, sensual, she says, "Did your big brother rescue you from the bad man?"

"Yes," Loki says with a shiver. "He did."

She passes by him and goes to her liquor cabinet. She pulls out a crystal decanter filled with an amber liquid.

"Why don't you tell me about that." She smiles at him beatifically as she pours herself a drink. She pauses, looking up from her cocktail. "You said you'd do anything, did you not?" Her voice is childlike, even innocent, despite the challenging gleam in her eyes.

Loki exhales. Well, fine. He'll say whatever it is he needs to say.

"I was seven," Loki begins. "And he was seventeen."

[Redacted]

"That's quite the story," White says, once Loki has finished. "If I asked your soldier would he tell me the same thing?"

"He doesn't seem to remember it, ma'am. He - he doesn't seem to remember me at all."

"So you could have made that all up."

Tears of frustration well in Loki's eyes. He has nothing to offer this woman. No leverage whatsoever. He'd told her his most intimate secret - stuff he'd never even told Sunny - and she's using it to toy with him. Moreover, Loki wanted those three hundred credits. Loki would hate to come away from a trick empty-handed, especially a trick like *this*.

Loki smiles, rueful, and shrugs loosely, opening his hands. "Ma'am, I'm just a lowly whore - have been all my life. I have never been able to repay him for what he did for me. This might be my only shot. And I can't do it without your help. I meant it when I said I'd do anything. Let me try again. Please. I promise I can do better."

She cocks her head. "Do you love your soldier, Loki?"

Loki has said *I love you* many times before, to several different men, and has never once truly meant it. It was a tool Loki had used under duress, out of fear of abandonment, to keep himself fed and sheltered and safe. How pathetic he was, trying desperately to extract that same feeling of romantic love from men who weren't Thor. Thor: the only person, aside from his mother, who has ever helped him without asking for anything in return. Thor, who seems to have imprinted himself on Loki's young psyche as a mother-bird imprints on its chick. Thor, his childhood saviour, his sanctuary, the object of Loki's first inklings of sexual desire.

The defining truth of Loki's life is that he loves Thor, and always has.

"Yes."

This is evidently what she wanted him to admit to, and still her eyes glimmer maliciously. "Love," she mocks, saccharine in that sensual accent of hers. But as the word fades from her lips it turns almost wistful. It's gone in a moment, and she goes cold.

"Get out."

Loki is put on the last transport back to the Compound late that night. The rush of adrenaline wears off quick and Loki crashes, lulled to sleep by the rumbling of the shuttle bus.

When the bus slows Loki is jerked back to full alertness all at once. It's funny - this time around he's so antsy to arrive at the Compound he's on the edge of his seat, one leg jittering restlessly in place. He wants his shitty little cabin. He wants his own bed. He wants Thor.

As soon as his boots hit the pavement, Loki starts making a beeline for the other side of the Compound, to where the little village of cabins is located.

"21774."

Loki forces himself to stop. Exhaling slowly through his nose, he turns around. There's a soldier standing there with a black patch on his lapel.

The soldier gestures with his fingers. "Come with me."

Having no other option, Loki obeys. The soldier leads him towards Central Block West, then through the labyrinthine corridors that Loki still gets lost in when he's collecting laundry.

The soldier motions to a row of chairs in the hallway. "Wait here."

Loki sets his duffle bag on the ground and sits. He rests his head on the wall behind him and lets his eyes flutter closed, although he can still see the glare of the fluorescent lights through his eyelids. All this waiting reminds him of being detained. That was always the worst part - the waiting.

Black saunters down the hallway some time later. Loki immediately stands at attention.

“Ah! Loki!” Black smiles brightly. “Glad to catch you. Won’t you step in my office for a few minutes? You can leave your things right there, there’s a lad.”

He unlocks his office door and steps aside to allow Loki entry. The door is closed behind them with a very final sounding click. Loki has never been in Black's office before, and he takes the opportunity to peer around. There are filing cabinets against every wall. Black’s desk is cluttered with piles and piles of folders and documents, so meticulously-stacked and orderly that not even a single slip of paper seems out of place. A taxidermied owl with its wings spread is perched in the upper corner of the room.

"Have a seat."

Loki does, stiffly, in the chair opposite Black’s desk. Black doesn’t sit down right away. He hovers over Loki like a drone, making Loki shrink just a little deeper into his chair. Black takes a bowl from on top of his desk and extends it in Loki’s direction.

"Chocolate?"

Loki must look as bewildered as he feels because Black adds:

"Yes, really! Go ahead, kiddo."

Loki tentatively takes a single candy from the bowl. Black’s looking at him like he expects Loki to eat it there and then, so Loki peels off the foil wrapping and pops it into his mouth. He’s so nervous he can hardly taste it at all - a crying fucking shame.

"So," Black says as he finally plunks himself down in his chair. "Whatcha think of old Moo?"

Loki doesn't say anything, and not just because of his mouthful of chocolate. He's learned that often the asker doesn't want him to answer; they just like to hear themselves pose the question. Besides which, he has no idea what to think about the Big House, about Moo, about Mrs. White, about any of it.

"Thought you were gonna be fucking Boss White, didn't cha," Black goes on. "I got some news for you: Boss White doesn't fuck Compound whores. No, you will be serving a higher purpose. I know Moo's a scary-looking fucker but he's a softie. Just has a bit of a hard time getting his rocks off. So

much so that even a face as comely as yours wouldn't do it for him. Don't take it too personal."

"I'm - sorry?"

"Comely means *pretty*, Loki. It means you're pretty! Pretty boy! I was trying to pay you a compliment."

If Loki didn't know better, he'd swear Black is making fun of him.

"Um, am I in trouble, sir?"

"If you were in trouble, believe me sweetheart, you'd know it," Black says, unsmiling, as he pulls out a small tin from his desk drawer, probably snuff. "D'you mind?"

Loki does something like nod and shrug at once. It's not like he'd say so even if he did mind. And anyway, it's better than inhaling second-hand smoke. Black unscrews the lid and takes a hit.

"You can relax. You're not in trouble. Quite the opposite, in fact. It turns out you and me got a goal in common." At Loki's puzzled face Black continues: "Oh yes. You see, I've been pushing for awhile now to get Red's teeth fixed. But, try as I might, I simply couldn't generate any momentum for it. Let's just say it was never that high on the ol' to-do list. I guess I didn't beg for it as prettily as you did. I gotta hand it to ya - it was ballsy of you to ask Mrs. White outright like that. She can be a touch... unpredictable. But I think you figured that out for yourself."

"You told her about me."

Black grins. "Recommended, is more like it. I figured you might be of use given your particular, shall we say, skill set. You're welcome, by the way. You think they let just anyone up to the Big House?"

Loki wants to know how Black found out about his past, but doesn't feel like he's in a position to ask.

"I make it my business to know things," Black says, as if he could read Loki's mind. "Oh yes. I

know all about you, Sticky-fingers Laufeyson. Maybe if you'd stuck to porn you'd have never been deported from [REDACTED]"

He's got what must be Loki's file on his desk. Loki wonders what else is in there. Then again, even if he could look through it, it's not like he could read what it says.

"I'd be curious to see one of your videos. Where would I find one?"

"I don't know," Loki answers, because he hates thinking about what Sunny did with the footage.

"You seem kind of skittish to be doing that kind of thing," Black notes. "Then again, you clearly had enough spunk to go and ask Mrs. White for *dental surgery* in exchange for a goddamn blowjob. You must have a real wild side, honey. Or a death wish."

Loki feels his face heat. He didn't think his request was *that* outlandish. When Black puts it like that, Loki sounds downright dumb.

"Well, you might've failed to gather a sample, but old Moo did exhibit interest, which is more than I can say about any of the others who've tried. He's got a type and you're *it*. Dark hair and green eyes. Hedy Lamarr, Ava Gardner, Vivien Leigh. I guess the whole 'boy' thing didn't put him off too much."

Loki has never heard those names before, and he doesn't expose his ignorance by asking.

"Which brings me to the reason I called you here. I have some truly incredible news: Mrs. White is going to give you a second chance. And the craziest part? She said she'd consider your request! She must've been moved by your little sob story. And that's sayin' something, because she ain't an easy lady to impress. So: you get us a sample, she'll put up the dollars, and I'll grant Red leave for treatment. But I'm warning you: you need to take this seriously. You need to get Mooncalf to cum. And you better do it fast because just between you and me, he ain't going to be lasting much longer."

Loki's voice is whisper-soft. "Why?"

"Why? Why anything. Because." Black sounds irritated. "You love to ask questions, don't you? You'll get yourself in trouble, poking your nose where it doesn't belong."

Loki ducks his head. It seems to him like he's poking his nose *exactly* where it belongs, given what they're asking him to do.

"Mrs. White mentioned something else - she says she wants you to fuck him the way you fuck your soldier. With *love*. It might," Black smiles crookedly, "*Do the trick*. Can you do that?"

Loki clenches his jaw. He hates that now Black knows his secret, too.

"I can do that."

Black beams at him. "You're a good boy, I can tell. It's heartwarming how much you care for Red, that you'd do this for him. I *knew* something had to be going on between you two! That kiss was somethin' else. A little incestuous if you really do think of him as your brother, but hey - stranger things have happened around here. I'll arrange a spot for you on Sunday's transport up to the Big House. Five p.m out the front gate. Don't be late."

"Thank you, sir."

"Speaking of Red - do me a favour and make sure he's okay. He's been a tad.....unstable lately. It makes me nervous, you understand. Red is my best man, my top sharpshooter. I would hate for him to go and do something rash. He was so glum after his first wife died. What's her name..."

"Jane," Loki utters it like a prayer. It feels important to say her name aloud. She was just as much a victim of this place as Loki is. Her shadow over Loki's life is impossible to ignore or escape. Loki is wearing her coat.

Black's face lights up. "Yeah! That's right. Janey. Pretty girl. Feisty. Anyway, be a dear and keep an eye on him for me, hmm?"

Black stretches and rises, indicating that their meeting is over. He checks his watch. "Christ on a cracker. Is that the time? My missus will be worryin' after me. And you must be tired as a dog. I bet you're antsy to get home to your mister."

Is Loki ever. He rises too. "Yes, sir."

"I'm glad we could have a little chat one-on-one. It's important to me that all my soldiers and their families are taken care of. Red especially. He's like a son to me. I practically raised him, you know. I made him what he is today. I made him great."

"Sure," Loki agrees quickly.

Black draws very close - close enough to rest his hand on Loki's neck. Loki immediately tenses up at the unexpected and unwelcome touch.

"If Red's like my son, I suppose that means you must be family too. And do you know what that means? Don't look down, look at me." Black's grip on Loki's neck tightens. He speaks very slowly and deliberately. "It means I'm going to *take care* of you."

Loki's mouth is so dry he can hardly talk. "Yes, sir, thank you sir."

"Which is why I would hate for something to happen to you." Black's voice is pitched almost inhumanly low. "And trust me, something *will* happen if you run your mouth about the Big House, about Mrs. White, about Moo. I *will* find out. I know everything. I know your date of birth, I know where you were born, I know the name of your whore mother. You're not a *stupid* boy, are you? Stupid boy?"

Loki can only shake his head no.

"Mmm, that's good, because I also know what happens to stupid boys who fail to keep their whore mouths shut. And let me tell you a little something: whatever you think the Rig is, whatever you've heard -" He leans in so close Loki can feel his breath, "It is *so much more*. Do we understand each other?"

Loki nods again. He barely manages to squeak: "Yes sir."

Black smiles again as he releases Loki and steps back. "One for the road?" he says, and offers Loki another chocolate.

Loki sprints to his cabin like he's never sprinted before. He sprints until his legs burn and his breath heaves. His duffle bag slaps against his back with each stride. Loki doesn't even lessen his pace when some of the night guards openly stare. It feels imperative to put as much distance as he can, as quickly as he can, between himself and Central Block West.

His cabin is like a lighthouse beacon in the darkness. Loki is so, so glad to see it. He wants a shower, and he wants his own bed. Then he unlocks the door and steps inside.

The kitchen area is in utter disarray. Five days away and it's already a pig sty: garbage piling up on the counters, broken bottles, muddy boot tracks on the floor. There are also new holes in the walls. Fist sized ones.

Thor appears out of the bedroom at once. He looks like he hasn't slept, or showered, or shaved the entire time Loki's been gone.

"Loki! You're back. What happened!? How did it go?" There's a crazed gleam in his eye. The anxious energy is coming off him in palpable waves. Loki can smell the alcohol on his breath.

Loki can't tell him about White or Moo - not when he's so agitated. Moreover, even if Loki wasn't absolutely, unequivocally certain Black would find out, he couldn't bear to get Thor's hopes up about the possibility of dental work.

"Fine," Loki somehow manages, even though he's still a bit out of breath from his sprint. "It was fine. I was assigned to a work camp....we shovelled rock to build an embankment. I got two hundred credits for the week."

"And Boss White?"

"Didn't meet him," Loki says. This at least, is not a lie.

Thor physically deflates he's so relieved. "Good, that's good. I shouldn't have let you go. You're not doing it again."

Loki's mouth opens as a protest burgeons on his lips. He *has* to go back.

"I earned eighty more credits doing that than doing laundry. It's just labour, Thor. It was fine. I'm happy to do it."

"I don't care. I forbid it."

"You can't do that."

"Yes I can. I paid for you. You do as I say."

"You *paid* for me? With what?"

Thor's lips press together tightly, just for a second. "You're not going. End of discussion."

Odin used to say that. *End of discussion*. And it always was.

Thor is pulling on his jacket over his sleep t-shirt and sweats. He's got a pack of cigarettes in his hands.

Loki lets out a noise of indignation. "I thought you said you was gonna quit?!"

"I'm sorry, okay? I need it."

Thor opens the door and steps outside. Loki's still got his own jacket on, so he follows Thor back out into the Compound yard. Loki can see what Black meant. Something is very, very wrong with him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Thor says as he lights up. He takes a puff and exhales away from Loki's face. "Why wouldn't I be okay."

He pulls out a flask from his coat pocket and takes a swig from it. Lit from the floodlights above, Thor looks gaunt, haggard. There are dark circles under his eyes.

"Would you stop staring at me like that? *God*, you fucking stare."

Caught, Loki averts his eyes.

"Sorry - I'm sorry. I shouldn't've snapped at you. I'm grateful for the extra credits, really I am, but it's just - it's just too much of a risk for you to go back again."

"What risk?" Loki presses. "Sex work? I told you, I didn't even sleep with anyone. And even if I did, what's it matter to you? You jealous or something?"

"You don't know these people," Thor utters, conveying a sense of urgency that chills Loki to the core. "You can't trust anything they tell you."

This is exactly what Loki *doesn't* want to hear, given the deal he's just struck.

"What makes you say that?"

Thor only shakes his head. "Alls I'm saying, is, we'll figure out the credit situation, okay? It'll be fine. You'll go back to the laundry on Monday and it'll be fine. Promise me, Loki. Promise me you won't go back."

He looks so unkempt, so frazzled - anything but *fine*. Loki hasn't the heart to keep pushing it.

"I promise," Loki says, although he already knows deep in his marrow he'll be on that transport to the Big House Sunday night.

Thor gives the nub of his cigarette a flick. "Look - uh. I'm sorry about the state of the cabin, I'll take care of it. I'm a fucking pig, Jane always said so. Leavin' my shit everywhere." Thor half-laughs, but it sounds more bitter than anything. "Fuck. I made her crazy. You cannot believe how

much I made that woman crazy. I've always been a slob, though, right? You know that about me."

Thor puffs on his cigarette like he can't suck it down fast enough.

"And I'm sorry about the smoking. I know I said I'd quit."

Loki swallows down his frustration. Here he is, working so hard to get Thor's teeth fixed, and Thor's just going to go and fuck them up all over again with his smoking habit.

"Maybe if you smoked and drank less we'd have more credits kicking around."

"I know, I know, I know," Thor mutters, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Fuck, I know. I just - I need it."

Despite Loki's frustration, despite everything that's happened over the last twenty four fucked-up hours, there's still room in Loki's heart to feel pity for Thor. Loki's only been in the Compound for a few months; Thor's been here for *years* - more than a decade. He can't help how messed up he is. When Loki thinks about it, it makes him want to cry.

"I really wish you'd tell me what's wrong."

Thor squints against the wind. It seems like he's not going to answer, the way he never answers anything. He has a jittery, restless air about him.

"Did I tell you Jane was pregnant? Made it to eight months, almost full term. She miscarried. It was a boy."

Loki did know this, based on what Sigryn had told him, and also because he'd found a box of baby toys and clothes in the cellar. He doesn't know why Thor is bringing this up now, or why Thor hadn't told him about it until this moment.

"I'm sorry."

Thor shakes his head. "I'm not. Who'd want to raise a kid here? They'd have made my son into another me. And what if I'd had a daughter that looked like Jane?" Thor looks away glumly. "The pretty ones have it worst, huh."

Loki isn't sure if Thor is asking his opinion - if Thor is qualifying him as a *pretty one*. So Loki says nothing.

"Some guys, they abandon their kids here to pay off their debt years. How fucked up is that. You got fourteen, fifteen year old kids born here now becoming soldiers themselves. Some are third generation. Can you believe that? Never experienced life on the outside. Their *parents* never experienced life on the outside. Then again, if this is all you know, you have nothing else to compare it to."

Thor takes out another cigarette from his pack and lights it. Loki watches this without comment. He doesn't want to derail the conversation by interrupting.

"Black was ecstatic when he heard Jane was expecting. I think he was glad cos it was one more thing he could dangle over my head - one more piece of collateral he could use to keep me in line. He even said he'd get us a crib once one became available. Jane didn't want it. Not just because it was from Black - she hated his guts - but also because she wanted the baby to sleep with her. With *us*, in our bed. So that we couldn't have sex as much, probably. She wanted that baby. Despite everything. I think because it would've given her something to do besides having to deal with me."

Thor looks away. His eyes become distant, wistful. "I wonder if she ever liked me at all."

Loki swallows down his envy - that Thor wants Jane still, misses her, despite their turbulent relationship.

"I'm sure she liked you," Loki offers.

Thor shrugs. He doesn't look convinced. "Maybe. Sometimes. I hope she did."

Thor starts to sniffle. He dabs his eye with the hand that isn't holding a cigarette.

"I'm a fucking mess," he rasps. "I'm sorry you had to come back to this bullshit. I know you've been through a lot. You don't need my shit on top of it."

“It’s okay,” Loki assures him. Then, after a beat: “I really am sorry about Jane.”

Thor accepts this with a grim nod. His face is taut, but Loki doesn’t miss the tremor in his lip, the quiver in the hand that’s holding a cigarette. Then, all at once, something inside Thor seems to snap. His breath starts to come out in rapid, laboured pants.

"I can't breathe."

“What?”

“I can’t breathe,” Thor says again. He clutches his chest like it's hurting him. “I can’t breathe.”

He curls over, propping himself up with one hand on the nearby light pole. The cigarette he’d just lit falls into the snow, forgotten. His face scrunches up and he starts to gulp air like a drowning man. The sounds he makes really do make it seem like he's choking. His smoker's wheeze makes it ten times worse.

Alarmed, Loki rests his hand on Thor’s back. "Do you need the doctor or something?"

Thor only shakes his head with a wet-sounding sob. His whole body is visibly shaking now. He’s got his other hand twisted in the front of his coat, as if he’s trying to manually stop the frenetic pace of his heart.

"I can't breathe." He sounds scared. "I can't breathe."

“Yes you can,” Loki assures him. "You’re alright.”

It’s like Thor can’t hear him. He keels over and crumples to the ground, hyperventilating. He cradles his head on his knees in front of him and continues to make horrid moaning noises. Loki kneels down at his side, not knowing what else to say or do. Cold, wet snow immediately starts to seep in through the denim of his jeans.

"You're okay," Loki repeats like a mantra, because he needs it to be true. He blinks away his own tears as he rubs Thor's back. "You're okay."

Holding him isn't what Loki pictured. He thought Thor would be the one to hold *him*, to make him feel safe and protected. Loki thought Thor could do anything, be anyone. He was always so cool, so capable and confident. Loki always wanted Thor to find him, to rescue him. He had fantasized about it for years, increasingly so after his mother died, despite the fact that he could no longer distinctly remember Thor's face.

Thor would know what to do, he'd thought. *Thor would take care of everything.*

Loki never dreamed that Thor would be the one needing rescuing.

"Tell me what's wrong," Loki pleads, once Thor has calmed down somewhat. "Hmm? Won't you please tell me what's wrong?"

"Don't ask me questions, Loki," Thor says without looking up. His voice is raw. "Please don't ask me questions."

That night, Thor's night terrors are worse than ever. Loki can't get him to sleep or calm down; he tosses and turns, keeping Loki up in the process.

Thor has another panic attack on the floor of their bathroom the following morning. He apologizes for it after, and Loki can tell he's embarrassed, yet Thor still won't say what's wrong. Loki has never seen him so bad. It's brutal to watch, and frustrating. Loki wants to help, but Thor won't let him.

Thor doesn't even want to eat anything; his teeth hurt him. The pain exacerbates everything, making Thor - charitably speaking - a huge asshole. If Loki could at least get that issue addressed, maybe Thor might pull himself together somewhat.

And fixing Thor's teeth means getting a sample from... *Moo*. It gives Loki the creeps just thinking about it. *Fuck him with love*. What does that even mean. And to what end? Why do they want a semen sample so bad? Nothing about this place makes any sense.

It doesn't matter. For Thor, Loki would do it. Loki would do anything.

Loki stands awkwardly at the canteen's back entrance, where the kitchen meets the alley. It smells greasy in there, like a bad diner.

"Loki!" Sigryn exclaims as she rushes over and wipes her hands on her splotchy apron. "You're back! What was it like?"

"Worked on a labour team shovelling truckloads of rock for five days." Loki smiles wanly as he passes her the clean towels he'd taken upon himself to deliver from the laundry. "It sucked."

"Oh." She was clearly anticipating something more interesting. *Ha!* If only she knew.

Loki scratches the back of his neck. "Actually, uh, I was wondering if I could take you up on your offer..."

"Red?"

Loki nods.

"He ain't been roughing you up, has he?"

"No, I just need him to sleep."

"Wait here."

She ducks back into the kitchen. When she reemerges, she has a small container in her hand. She unscrews the lid and counts out four small white pills, which she then passes to Loki.

Loki rolls them around in the palm of his hand. "They won't hurt him, right?"

"They're just benzos," she replies with an eyeroll. "I give 'em to Green all the time. Grind 'em up and slip 'em in his food or something."

"How many?"

"Two's plenty to start. But try to do it when he's not drinking."

Loki huffs. When is Thor not drinking.

"You got 'em?" Sigryn asks.

Loki reaches into his own coat and pulls out eight cigarettes, stolen over several of Thor's packs. Loki thinks this is only fair, given that Thor had lied to him about quitting. Still, he'd much prefer if Thor didn't notice their absence.

"You really shouldn't smoke," Loki tells her as he hands them over.

"Yeah, well. You really shouldn't steal from your husband." She hazards a glance back inside the canteen's kitchen. "I gotta get back to work. Tell me how it goes, yeah?"

Thor gets home late that night and goes straight for the whisky. Loki doesn't feel like he's in a position to say anything, since Thor has done this virtually every night since Loki's gotten here and Loki has never spoken up about it before. There's only so much nagging Loki feels he can get away with in their... *relationship*, and Loki would much rather nag about Thor's smoking than his drinking.

Loki can't say he's the best cook in the world, but Thor does seem to like this one dish he makes -

a stew, made with fried ground pork, onions, overdone carrots, and mashed up potatoes. It's especially delicious tonight because Loki tossed a ton of butter in it. It's the only way he could mask the subtle chemically flavour. Still, Loki's chest pounds as he serves a bowlful to Thor. He wishes it hadn't come to this, but he honestly doesn't think Thor would take some random pill just because Loki asked him to. He's way too paranoid for that.

"Thanks," Thor says as he tucks in. Loki watches him snarf several heaping spoonfuls before he relaxes enough to eat his own untainted stew.

Thor finishes his dinner without further comment and rises to fix himself another drink. Loki can tell he's already somewhat buzzed; Loki doesn't know what the pill's gonna do to him on top of that, but regardless, it's probably not the best idea for Thor to keep drinking. Loki snatches the bottle right out of Thor's hand and downs the rest of the contents himself. Thor blinks at him - more baffled than outright mad. His hand still hangs mid-air from when he'd been holding the bottle.

"D'you wanna play some cards?" Loki coughs as he wipes his mouth, before Thor can ask what the hell's gotten into him. Loki doesn't even wait for Thor to agree before he's getting the deck from the junk drawer. Loki does a bit of one-handed trick shuffling to catch Thor's eye, although he's a little dizzy from all that alcohol he'd chugged so fast and his hand-eye coordination isn't what it normally is. Loki figures he's only gotta keep Thor occupied for about a half hour before the pill kicks in. At least it's too late in the day for Thor to send him to the commissary to get another bottle.

Thankfully, Thor goes along with it. He seems to really like just watching Loki shuffle. Thor's attention is heady, addicting. It makes Loki's stomach flutter.

They play a match of King's corner, which Loki is zero percent invested in. Then another. Loki watches Thor carefully for any sign of the pill's effects.

By the third game, Loki is beginning to suspect that maybe Sigryn gave him duds. But then Thor's eyes droop and he starts to slouch in his chair. His brow furrows, like he knows he's extremely tired but confused as to why.

"I think I need...to go to bed."

"Okay," says Loki. "Sure. We'll call it. I probably wasn't going to win that round anyway."

Thor slumps over the table and knocks over the glass of water which Loki had given him.

"Okay," Loki says again. At least the pills were real. He mops the spillage up with a kitchen towel. He had hoped to maybe coax Thor into the shower, but now he sees that probably won't be happening.

"Do you wanna maybe brush your teeth?" Loki offers. "I can help you."

Thor sighs from where his head is pillowed in his arms. His voice is flat and utterly resigned. "No point."

Loki only feels worse when he tries to comb out Thor's nest of hair and discovers dreadlocked clumps inside his ponytail.

"Oh, Thor."

Evidently, Thor hasn't been brushing his hair either. It's like he's completely given up on himself.

Thor makes a nondescript noise when Loki tries to brush the clumps out. But Thor's hair is thick and badly matted. It's probably not salvageable. Loki will have to talk to Thor about cutting it off.

Thor groans when Loki hoists him out of his chair. Loki manages to get him on his feet - mostly - and it's a damn good thing their cabin's so small because Loki doesn't think he can haul Thor more than a few paces. Loki half-drags Thor to their bedroom and tosses him on their bed. Thor lands like a boulder with an *omph*.

"I'm going to undress you now," Loki tells him.

It takes some maneuvering. Thor's dead weight and basically useless, but eventually Loki manages to wrangle him out of his boots, socks, sweater, t-shirt and pants, until he's stripped down to his boxers.

Thor is still the most beautiful man Loki has ever seen - shitty tattoos and mangy hair and rotten teeth and all. Even this place couldn't snuff out his natural radiance; not completely. It aches how

badly Loki wants him, *still* wants him, even though he's nothing like the man Loki expected him to be. Well - he was always kind of a jerk. That part's the same. But he's a good person deep down. Loki knows this to be true.

"Do you want me to get you off? Would that help you relax?" Loki's hand is resting on the waistband of Thor's boxers. He's feeling bold because of all that cheap whisky he'd drunk earlier. In *the voice*, Loki adds, "I would be *so good* to you, if you'd only let me."

Thor bats him away sloppily. "Yer just a kid."

Loki huffs. He hasn't been a kid in a long time. He sits back on his heels.

"You don't even remember me as a kid." A harsh edge creeps into his voice. "You don't remember me at all."

It cuts that Thor has deemed him so forgettable. Loki figured that Thor probably didn't spend the last twelve years obsessing over him the way Loki has for Thor, but he truly didn't think Thor would have almost *completely forgotten* about him, either.

"I really wish you'd remember *something* about me. What about target practice in the junkyard? Would you be the expert sharpshooter you are today without all those cans I used to find for you? Hmm? Mr. Big Shot?"

Thor predictably, does not answer. He's nodding off.

"Once you stole Sleppie from me and you tossed him so high he got stuck in the light fixture in the foyer. Do you remember that? Then I started to cry and you must've felt bad because you got a chair from the living room and brought him down for me."

Loki can't remember his childhood *without* Thor. He's a key figure in Loki's earliest memories. When Loki closes his eyes he can still picture the layout of their house and its décor. Loki sometimes walks through it in his mind's eye. He can see it all so vividly: the wood panelling in the living room, Odin's recliner and war medals case, the kitchen with the sunny lemon motif and kitschy rooster figurines. Out back was a rusted swingset that must've been Thor's once, and the well-trodden pathway to the junkyard and shop. Upstairs was the master bedroom, which Loki never really felt allowed to enter. And, at the end of the hall -

"Do you remember when I used to sleep in your room?"

Loki utters this like a prayer, hoping against hope that Thor would make some noise of recognition or affirmation. But Thor doesn't. He looks like he's out cold.

Loki wishes he were brave enough to be able to ask this outright, when Thor is lucid enough to give him a straight answer. But truthfully he's scared to broach the subject. He's scared that maybe he misremembered - that maybe he actually *did* make it up, like Odin said he did. Or maybe Thor might accuse Loki of somehow having brought the attention on himself. *Naturally provocative* is the term Mr. Bee had used, even though Loki had no idea what that meant at the time. What if everything Loki has ever believed about Thor turned out to be false. What if Loki has lived all this time fantasizing about a hero who doesn't exist - who *never* existed. Loki already feels stupid enough for having pinned his hopes and dreams on a man who doesn't remember him at all. Loki doesn't know if he could stand the utter mortification of having Thor refute his most pivotal childhood memory.

Loki asks an even more brazen question.

"What is the Rig."

Unexpectedly, Thor stirs.

"**The Rig**," he mumbles.

"Yeah. You know. That fucking thing out in the ocean," Loki says, since Thor's in no position to jerk him around. "The reason why we're here. The reason for everything. The Rig."

"**The Rig**," Thor repeats. "**The Rig** is..."

He might actually say it. Loki's heart starts to race.

"What is it," Loki urges. "Tell me."

"**The Rig** is..." Thor's face twists. "Where they took Jane."

Thor lets out something like a strangled, mournful cry.

"Jane is dead, Thor," Loki says, as gently as he can, despite his mounting frustration. He doesn't want to talk about Jane right now. Moreover, he can't help but feel like Thor was on the cusp of actually telling him something for once. "She died from an infection, remember? After her miscarriage. You're just....confused."

Thor shakes his head. "They took her from me. They took her from me. I should've known - they wouldn't let me see her body."

He sounds like he means it. But he *is* pretty fucked up. He probably doesn't know where his own dick is.

Eventually Thor calms down, lulled by the drug into a sleep. Loki had counted on this to finally get some sleep himself. But their exchange has got Loki feeling deeply unsettled, and rest eludes him.

Subtly, Loki packs.

Loki remembers how awful it was when Thor left for two weeks without telling him where he was or when he'd be back. Loki's not about to do that to him, even if it might be good to give him a taste of his own medicine. Thor's been such a basketcase lately; Loki doesn't think he can handle any more stress.

Loki knocks on Sigryn's cabin door. A man answers. He's got a cigarette dangling from his lip and a bored expression on his scruffy face. This must be Green. Loki was not expecting to meet him.

"Hello sir. Sorry to bother you. Is, uh. Sigryn home?" Loki realizes that maybe having a man show up at his door asking after his wife might come off as a bit shady, so Loki appends: "I'm Red's wife. I just need to talk to her a minute."

"What about?"

Loki is trying to think of a good response when Sigryn's red head pops up behind Green.

"Loki?"

"Hey. Sigryn." Loki is very relieved to see her. He gestures with his head outside. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

Sigryn raises an eyebrow at him, but she nonetheless goes to get her coat.

"Five minutes," says Green.

Sigryn rolls her eyes, throws on her coat and steps outside. She closes the door behind her to afford them some privacy.

"Be quick. I gotta finish dinner."

"Did I get you in trouble?"

"He's just cranky. What d'you want? I don't have any more pills to spare right now."

"It's not - that. I need to ask you a favour."

Her eyes narrow. "What kinda favour?"

"I need you to tell Red I'm going back to the labour camp."

"Why? Will he be mad?"

"Yeah, but at me, not at you."

"I ain't inserting myself into this. Tell him yerself."

"He'll try and stop me."

"Y'know, a lot of girls here wouldn't disobey Red if he were their husband," she points out, reminding Loki, yet again, that Thor is something of the Compound wives' resident crush. "Besides, didn't you say the camp sucked?"

"Trust me, it's important. Tell him I'll be fine. Tell him....tell him I'll be back in a few days."

She squints at him. "You're tricking."

Loki wants to deny it, but Sigryn is too familiar with the nature of sex work in the Compound to buy such an obvious lie.

"Maybe I am. So what? I wouldn't be the first wife here to trick on the side." Loki pauses. "Don't tell him that, please."

"I want two full packs."

"Fine," Loki huffs. They might be friends, but you don't get something for nothing in the Compound. It's going to be a pain in the ass stealing that many cigarettes without Thor noticing. "I'll get them to you when I get back. I'll have to do it piecemeal, though."

He turns to leave, but she stops him. "Hey Loki, when you goin'?"

"Tomorrow evening. Five PM."

"You should really visit Mamma first," Sigryn says.

"Who?"

"Mamma," Sigryn repeats, as if that explains everything. "Meet me here tonight at midnight. Come alone. And bring an offering."

It's cold. Loki doesn't know why he's doing this. Thor is doped up and sleeping peacefully. Loki could be lying next to him, cozy and warm, nestled against Thor's broad back. He had planned on taking the last of those pills himself, since the thought of having to go back to Moo and Mrs. White fills him with a deep, unyielding dread. Instead, here he is on Sigryn's doorstep, in the middle of the frigid night.

"What are we doing. It's fucking freezing."

Sigryn locks her cabin door behind her. "I told you, we're going to see Mamma."

She leads him to what Loki recognizes as the Compound brothel's door, demarcated by the red light glowing ominously outside.

"This way," Sigryn says, tugging on his hand. Loki follows her around the back of the building. There's another door facing the alley, upon which Sigryn knocks a particular rhythm. After a beat, a small slat in the door opens, revealing a woman's eyes.

"No men," the woman says flatly, muffled by the door.

"He's one of us. Red's new wife. He's here for a blessing."

The eyes behind the door flit to Loki. Loki just stands there dumbly. Then the slat closes and the door opens, revealing a dimly-lit back passageway.

"Follow me," The woman inside says.

Loki has never been inside the brothel before. He assumes the tricking rooms are above, but the

woman leads him down into the basement. It's dark down there, lit only by candles. There are red tapestries hanging on the wall and red cushions scattered on the floor. It's warm from the candles, but also kind of stuffy, like a womb.

Dug out of the walls, seemingly out of the earth itself, are little niches in which blue-flowered plants are growing under fluorescent lights. Loki hasn't seen a real flower in so long it takes him by surprise.

Loki is about to ask what the plants are for when a bead curtain parts and he is greeted by a chubby older woman with pendulous breasts and a mass of wild grey-streaked hair. She's wearing heavy eyeliner and mismatched jewelry, and each of her forearms is loaded with a stack of bangles that jingle as she moves. Her face is deeply creased, but she is not ugly.

"Mamma," Sigryn says. They embrace, such that their foreheads touch. It's a very intimate-looking gesture. Loki feels like he's intruding by watching.

Sigryn pulls away. "Mamma, this is Loki. Commander Red's new wife."

"Ah yes. Commander Red." The older woman smiles a wry little smile. Her voice is low and pleasantly raspy. "And what do you seek, my child?"

"Your blessing, Mamma," Sigryn answers for Loki. "He's going to go work in the Big House."

"Did you bring an offering?"

Sigryn elbows Loki in the ribs, and Loki pulls out a single foil-wrapped chocolate ball from his pocket. He extends it to the old woman, not knowing whether or not it's good enough for....whatever it is he's buying.

Her kohl-lined eyes widen. "Where did you get that."

"From Black. I'm sorry, I didn't have anything else." Loki pauses. "Is it - acceptable?"

Mamma nods, taking the chocolate and tucking it somewhere in her long patchwork skirt. She

gestures to a few ratty-looking embroidered cushions on the floor. "Come, sit. Let's have a look at you."

And so, Loki sits. Mamma lights more candles, although it doesn't brighten the room any. She leans in close to Loki's face.

"Your eyes," Mamma remarks, and Loki braces himself for the inevitable comment about his eye colour. But then she says, "Your eyes are so sad."

Loki doesn't know what to say to that. No one has ever vocalized that to him before.

"You were a sex worker before you came here."

Loki nods.

"For how long?"

Loki purses his lips. He doesn't want to say.

"No need to be ashamed," the woman says fondly. "We're all whores here."

Loki fidgets with a loose thread on his sleeve. "....Eight years."

"So young," Mamma says, but she doesn't seem entirely surprised either. "Mmm. We will invoke the Great Mother's presence now." She closes her eyes and starts to incant: "O Whore of Babylon, Mother of Prostitutes, I call upon you and all your angels: Salome, Ching Shih, Theodora, Lillith the Untamed, and the Prophetess Maria de Naglowska. Watch over your son, Loki. Keep him safe as he tricks in the Big House. Shield him from harm, disease, and slander. Most of all, I call upon you to protect him from **the Great Evil**."

She pulls out a small pot from her skirt and opens it, revealing a thick dark red paste. She dips her thumb in it and reaches out to smear a dab across Loki's forehead. "I bless him with red, the colour of whores: Red, the colour of lust and passion, menstrual blood and lipstick."

She smiles at him, eyes crinkling. "Scream with me."

"What?"

"Scream. It's alright. Are you shy?"

"Just...scream?" Loki repeats uncertainly.

"I'll go first," Sigryn says, kneeling down across from the woman so that they're face to face.

"For your sister?"

"Yeah," nods Sigryn. The two women clasp arms.

At first, Loki thinks this scream thing is a metaphor for something else. But no. Sigryn literally starts to scream. And the older woman....screams back. Not an echo, but more in tandem: breathing in when Sigryn does, crying out when Sigryn does, following the ebb and flow of Sigryn's keening. And it keeps going and going. Sigryn screams until her voice goes hoarse, at which point her cries turn into a kind of mournful wail, which the older woman likewise mimics. This is the scream of the powerless, of the disenfranchised and downtrodden, of those who suffer the most.

They stop almost at once, panting heavily.

"Your turn, my dear." The old woman's voice is even more gruff than before but no less warm.

Loki hedges. "I'm not -"

"You'll feel better afterwards, trust me."

They reposition themselves around him such that Loki is the one kneeling across from Mamma.

She clasps his forearms the way she had done for Sigryn. Her touch is firm and reassuring. Sigryn's hand is on his back to - comfort him? Coax him? This feels so weird.

"I don't know if I can do this."

"Everyone's self-conscious their first time," Mamma's eyes glitter in the candlelight. "If you can't scream for yourself, perhaps you should offer your scream for another." She leans in close and cups Loki's face, as though Loki were something truly precious. "Who are you grieving for, hmm? What's got those beautiful eyes so sad?"

There is only one answer that comes to mind. It exits Loki's lips brokenly, like shards of glass.

"My mom."

"Was she a sex worker too?"

Loki nods; it's all he can manage. He's starting to feel that telltale tightness in his throat, that irrepressible urge bubbling up from within his chest. The emotionally-laden atmosphere in the room is fast wearing down his meagre defences.

"And where is she?"

"She's dead," Loki blurts out. His tears spill over and he starts to cry. "She's dead because of me."

"Why do you say that?"

Loki can't deal with this right now. "I don't want to talk about it. Please. Can we just--"

"Of course. We'll just scream then. Alright? For your mother."

Loki was already crying, but then Mamma starts mimicking him, matching him sob-for-sob. She's got a way of working him up, making things more frenzied and hysterical, until before he knows it, Loki is screaming too. Months of trying to stifle his tears in the shower so Thor won't hear has

made him particularly raw and susceptible. That this woman is crying with him makes Loki cry harder; until now, no one else has mourned his mother's death. Not a single other living person has shed a tear for her. She died as unremarkably as she lived: as an undocumented, illiterate, penniless sex worker, just like the son she left behind. Loki has borne his grief alone for so long that on this night Loki screams just like he did that morning he found his mom overdosed on the couch.

The session soon escalates into something else - something dark and primal. For all that he loved his mother, Loki is angry that she never managed to get clean, angry at her broken promises, angry at the types of men she resorted to tricking with. Loki is angry at Odin for leaving them with nothing after the *years* of care he and his mom had given him. Loki is angry at Sunny for being fucking right about everything. And Loki is angry at Thor, for his self-destruction spiral, for having apparently gone the last twelve years without sparing Loki a *single fucking thought*.

It soon devolves back down into weeping. Loki loses track of how long he cries. It might be only ten minutes, it might be over an hour. He sobs into the tits of this crazy woman he just met. It's like he can't stop himself, like trying to stop a runaway freight train. He literally feels out of control.

By the end of it, Loki feels wrung out like a sponge, utterly drained and exhausted, more so than when he'd worked at that labour camp. He's a wreck. His face is puffy and snot is dripping down his face. But, damn it, he *does* feel better - or at least, numb. His mind is blank in a way it hasn't been for months, despite the throbbing pain behind his eyeballs. He can feel Mamma's fingers carding through his hair. It feels so good to be held by someone who wasn't trying to fuck him. Like being held by his mother...

Loki must fall asleep because he wakes an indiscernible amount of time later, confused, disorientated and crusty-eyed. Loki feels like he's been hit by a truck. He's stiff from having fallen asleep in a weird position: half curled over this woman's lap.

"Where's Sigryn," he croaks as he sits up. "What time is it."

"Sigryn has gone home to Green," Mamma replies, sing-song. "The witching hour is nigh."

"I'm so sorry," Loki says, appalled and embarrassed. His voicebox physically aches from the screaming. "I need-"

"To get home to Red, yes." She stands and helps Loki to his feet. "Come to me if you need another scream. I will scream with you."

“Okay,” Loki says, but in reality all he wants to do is to get the hell out of here.

Mamma reaches into her skirt and presents him with a small, cheap-looking compass on a chain. "Here. I have been saving this for someone special. Take it with you. Use it to lead you home, when it is time."

Loki accepts it without question. Sex workers are a naturally superstitious lot; most carry talismans for protection. Loki isn't sure if he buys into that kind of thing, but tonight, on the night before he has to go back to the Big House, Loki is very much a believer.

"Thank you," Loki says, and squeezes the compass in his palm.

Loki sleeps in until noon the following morning. When he looks in the mirror, he is a little startled by the red smear still on his forehead. He does not wash it off.

Thor's off doing whatever it is he does during the day, so Loki spends his remaining few hours in the Compound preparing meals for the upcoming week. He worries Thor might not eat if there's no readymade food in the fridge. Loki can't trust him to take care of himself. It's times like these where Loki wishes he could leave a note so Thor wouldn't worry.

He checks the time: four thirty. Loki takes a deep breath, gathers his overnight bag, and heads to the Compound's front yard. The shuttle hasn't arrived yet, so Loki queues up alongside the other labourers looking to make some extra credits. It's cold so Loki tucks his hands in his coat pockets. He feels something foreign in there: the compass Mamma had given him the night before. Loki had completely forgotten about it. He weighs it in his hand. It's very light, which makes it seem cheap. The arrow spins and spins then stops, pointing in the exact direction of -

"Loki?" Thor is storming over from the other side of the yard. "What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?"

Loki swallows tightly. The last thing he needs right now is for Thor to make this more difficult than it already is. He really thought Thor would be tied up at this time of day; Loki was counting on having Sigryn talk to him after Loki had already left.

Well, there's nothing for it now. Loki squares his shoulders and tucks the compass back in his pocket.

"I'm going back," he says.

"The hell you are. I told - I told you no," Thor hisses, as if he's trying not to make a scene. He is not succeeding.

"I have to."

Thor grabs Loki by the upper arm. "You're coming home."

Loki digs in his heels and wrenches himself out of Thor's grasp. "*No*."

"No..?" Thor echoes, as if he'd never heard that word before. A few people are staring now. Loki knows he's embarrassing Thor by defying him in public. If only Loki could explain why he's doing this, maybe Thor might back off. But he can't.

"No," Loki says again.

Thor leans in close. "Don't make me hit you."

Loki just feels so tired - tired deep in his bones. Tired - even bored - of being pushed around by men who know they can get away with it.

"Do you know how many times I've been hit in my life," Loki says wearily.

Thor capitulates at once. He's realized that his empty threats will get him nowhere. Moreover, Thor has figured out that Loki isn't actually going to do manual labour. Loki can see this in Thor's face.

"Don't leave me," Thor pleads, so quietly it's almost inaudible.

Loki is overtaken by a sudden, vivid memory: of the night Thor and Odin had had their final big blowout fight. One of them had thrown a bottle of beer at the other; Loki can't say who, nor can he remember what they'd been arguing about. His mother had told Loki to keep out of the way. The two men had trashed the kitchen that night. His mother's collection of rooster figurines had all been destroyed.

Don't leave me, is what Loki had thought, standing on the driveway, watching Thor toss his bags in his muscle car and speed off into the black night. He had somehow known, even as a nine year old, that Thor would never, ever be coming back.

How ironic that it has come to this. Loki ought to feel heartened that Thor has come to care for him as much as he does. Instead, it's like a knife twisting in his chest.

Then Loki does something he's dreamed about doing for as long as he can remember: he surges forwards and presses a kiss right onto Thor's cool, cracked lips. When Loki pulls away, Thor's face is dumbstruck.

"I'm sorry," Loki whispers. "Don't worry about me. I'll be back soon."

four of nine

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween, my spooky friends! Please enjoy and let me know if I spooked ya good ^^

Heads up: more brief non-explicit Loki/OC.

Tw: non-explicit mentions of child abuse, abortion and suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Labcoat's name is Dr. Duntsch. Loki learns this as he's giving Loki dick another swab.

"They tell me you worked in adult films?" Duntsch dabs at his glistening forehead with his handkerchief as Loki does up his jeans.

"Yeah."

"What did you do?"

Loki looks at him. "What did I do?"

"As in, acts."

"I dunno," huffs Loki. "All of them."

"All of them?" Dr Duntsch visibly swallows. "Which one did you enjoy the most?"

"I don't remember," Loki mumbles.

When they arrive in front of Moo's door, deep in the underground lab, Loki pauses. He really

doesn't want this Duntsch guy breathing down his neck while he's trying to seduce his science project, so Loki says, "It might help if we could have some....uh, privacy?"

Duntsch relents with a single nod. "You have five days. We'll be observing your progress."

"Five days or what?"

Dr. Duntsch's lips purse. "You have five days."

With that, the vault-like doors are opened and Loki is let back into Moo's room. Moo is there, sitting in his armchair in front of the television, like he hadn't moved at all since Loki was here last. He takes stock of Loki with that same quiet curiosity that he'd exhibited before. Loki can hear the very final-sounding *click* of the door being locked behind him.

"I'm sorry how I reacted to you last time. Um. I was nervous."

Moo just stares at him with his one normal eye. His other eye juts out of its socket at a weird angle; its pupil is milky-blue and unfocused, staring at everything and nothing at once. Loki wonders if it hurts. It *looks* like it hurts.

"I was hoping we could get to know each other better," Loki goes on. It sounds so asinine and fake - and not even in the normal asinine fake way he used to talk to Johns. "My name's Loki. I'm from [REDACTED]. I do card tricks."

It's hard to think of what to say beyond that. Loki can't really tell if Moo understands him. He does not acknowledge anything Loki says either in word or in gesture. Loki is reminded of when Sunny was trying to train him out of his crippling shyness. It was so much easier not to be shy when he was stoned out of his mind. The fact that he's stuck in an underground lab with some freakshow does little to boost Loki's confidence, either.

And so, Loki pays more attention to the movie posters on the walls. This time Loki notices that all the female leads have dark hair and either blue or greenish-coloured eyes; that must be what had Black meant when he said Moo had a *type*. Loki doesn't think he looks anything like those actresses, aside from superficial characteristics like hair and eye colour. He's not even a girl.

"I like your movie collection. This is....really cool." He runs his fingers over the rows and rows of

cheery-looking VHS tapes. "I've never seen so many before. What's your favourite one?"

Loki turns around and Moo is standing *right there*.

"Oh - Jesus," Loki blurts out, jolting backwards into the shelves. He hadn't heard Moo at all - the thick dusky pink carpet muffles a lot of sound. Out of his chair, Moo extraordinarily tall, at least six five. He's top-heavy with comparatively spindly legs, like a barrel on stilts.

Moo shuffles past him, unperturbed by Loki's startled reaction - or merely accustomed to it. He walks by kicking out each atrophied leg in an unnatural, jilted gait, like a newborn foal. He selects a worn-looking VHS tape off the shelf and presents to Loki like a treasure. Loki can't read the title, but predictably it features a dark haired starlet on the cover smiling adoringly at her much older male co-star.

"Cool," Loki feigns. "Uh, you wanna watch it?"

Moo seems to really, *really* like that idea. Loki exhales in relief. That'll give him time to settle his nerves and formulate a game plan.

Loki pops the tape out of its clamshell case and plugs it into the VCR as Moo sinks down into his recliner. The cushion has completely conformed to his lumbering body from years of prolonged use. Loki, meanwhile, takes a seat on the nearby couch and curls his knees up to his chest to watch.

The movie begins with a sweeping orchestral score and opening credits. It's in black and white and looks like it was made in the thirties. Loki hadn't seen any old Hollywood movies before. It's surreal to see the world portrayed in that way - like looking at a different planet, or an alternate universe. It's hard to believe the world was once like that.

It's not a bad movie, but Loki had been up *screaming* with Mamma all night, and despite his best efforts to stay awake he feels himself nodding off. He must fall asleep mid-way through, because he wakes up to someone stroking his hair. Loki blinks awake. It's Moo, looming over him. Loki jerks away before he can help himself.

"Sorry, yeah, you can touch."

It takes everything in Loki to stay put and allow this. Moo caresses his hair reverently, but a bit

unsure, like a small child petting a cat for the first time and not quite knowing how. He breathes loudly, laboured. Loki wonders if this excites him.

Loki decides to go for it. Like last time, it's best not to think about what he's doing or why. The sooner it's done and over with the sooner he can get back to the Compound. Loki reaches for Moo's sweatpants and pulls them down to expose Moo's penis. It's soft and a very odd purplish colour. Loki takes it in hand and tries jerking it a few times, then puts his mouth around it.

Moo makes an upset-sounding noise and curls away. He didn't like that.

Loki sighs and helps pull up Moo's pants. He should have known it wouldn't be as easy as that.

Moo makes him rewatch the movie again from the start - something of a punishment for having fallen asleep, Loki thinks - and then another movie after that. White-clad orderlies come in some time later with dinner: mashed potatoes, carrots and roast beef cut into tiny chunks and slathered in gravy. It's the best food Loki's had since he came to the Compound, aside from maybe Sigryn's pierogies. Still, he'd much rather be eating his own shitty cooking in the Compound with Thor than fine dining underneath the Big House with Moo.

After dinner, more movies. Loki's eyeballs throb. He hasn't watched this much television since.....he can't remember when. He knows he should probably make another overture, but he's still a bit rattled from his previous attempt. Maybe he just needs Moo to warm up to him a bit first.

The orderlies return later that night, ostensibly to shower Moo and get him settled in for bed. Loki is very glad not to be involved in that process, although it *is* interesting to watch. Moo allows their handling placidly, like a gentle giant. He must be used to it. Loki's allowed to shower himself after they're done. The bathroom is outfitted with rails and grips and a raised toilet seat. It's pristinely clean, bordering on institutional-looking. Loki doesn't know what the deal is with this Moo guy, but he can't say that he isn't well taken care of.

When Loki emerges from the bathroom, Moo's already tucked in bed with his breathing mask over his face. His railed hospital bed isn't exactly made for two, so Loki is given a pillow and blanket and is made to settle down on the couch in front of the television, which is fine by Loki. He'd much prefer that to having to cuddle up next to Moo, anyway.

Loki shouldn't have let himself nap during the movie because now sleep eludes him. All he can hear is the constant puffing noise of the CPAP machine and Moo's gravelly snores. Loki misses Thor desperately. He hopes Thor isn't too worried. If only he could talk to him, reassure him, hear his voice....

Loki closes his eyes. He has four days.

In the morning the orderlies bring breakfast: scrambled eggs, fried ham, orange juice and fruit salad in a thick, sugary syrup. Moo eats with his mouth open, and sometimes bits of chewed food falls out of his mouth and down his shirt, leaving little trails of grease or spit. He makes gross smacking noises as he eats too. Loki isn't sure whether it's because of his swollen tongue, or that jumble of teeth, or the fact that his jaws don't appear to close all the way. It would take a lot more than *that* to turn Loki off a good meal. Loki's gone hungry far too many times to be put off by something as negligible as bad table manners.

After breakfast, more movies. Loki's ass hurts just thinking about having to sit around all day in front of the television. God, he doesn't even know what time of day it is down here. There are no windows, no natural light or fresh air. The only way to track time at all is by the punctual stream of orderlies coming in to help Moo at mealtimes: breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner.

"Hey, Moo. Moo. Wanna see a card trick?"

Loki pulls out the deck of cards he'd smuggled with him and executes a bit of cardistry for show - as much for his own sanity as for Moo's entertainment. Moo is at once immensely intrigued. Simply having Moo's attention on him is unsettling. It's that one eyeball just.... *out there* like that. Moo goes along with the trick eagerly, although he only has enough dexterity to point at this or that card when Loki asks, so he can't quite participate as a normal audience member might. Nonetheless, Loki manages to pull off a few standard tricks. Rudimentary stuff, nothing super impressive, but Moo is delighted. His lips pull back to expose more jumbled teeth, and he claps and makes a weird huffing noise.

Encouraged, Loki reaches for Moo's waistband and slips his hand inside. Moo's happy huffing noise turns to a whine, and he curls away before Loki gets any further than that.

Later, they're watching yet another movie. Loki is on the couch, not really paying attention. He pulls out his compass. It points directly at Moo's recliner.

Loki soon figures out that the compass tracks Moo's position. No matter where Loki is in relation to Moo, the compass always points towards him. Compasses are supposed to point north, Loki knows that much, although he doesn't specifically know the mechanics of why. It seemed to have

been working on the drive here. Something about Moo is throwing it off.

Strange.

On the third day, Duntch takes him outside into the hall for a pep talk.

“There is some concern that you are not being proactive. You have only initiated sexual contact twice.”

Duntch’s cheeks flush bright pink as he says this. He’s evidently been observing Loki through the cameras in Moo’s room. Loki wonders if he’s getting his rocks off peeping on him, the freak.

“I’m sorry. It’s just a bit of a....strange situation,” Loki answers carefully. “I’ll get on it.”

“Mrs. White would like to remind you of what’s at stake here,” Duntch says. “It’s critical that you take this seriously-”

“I am,” Loki insists. “I’m trying. He doesn’t like it. What d’you expect me to do?”

"Loki," Duntch says - the first time he’s said Loki’s name aloud. “You have to find a way. Try harder. Please.”

The urgency in Duntch's voice lingers long after Loki is returned to Moo.

Loki half wishes Moo were more aggressive. That would spare Loki from having to actively *do* anything. Taking charge of this situation himself is decidedly much more nauseating. Loki is very good at allowing things to happen to him. If Moo would just make the first move, then Loki would know what to do from there. It's not that Moo doesn't like him. Moo seems to like him a great deal, in fact. But what he likes isn't sex. It's movies. Loki isn't sure Moo understands that Loki's a sex worker, that he's here specifically *for* sex. Loki isn't even sure Moo understands it's sex that they're doing. For all Loki knows, Moo just thinks of it as a *sample extraction*.

Moo certainly wouldn't know anything about sex from the movies he watches. Though they all involve some kind of romantic escapade, they're all laughably sexless, so innocent and wholesome it's annoying. The idyll represented in those movies is so far removed from Loki's lived experience that watching them actually pisses Loki off. It makes viscerally salient the unfairness of his life. Andy Hardy got to be a kid, a boy, a *teenage* boy. Loki didn't get a chance to have crushes, or date, or go to school or prom or get into mischief or do anything normal teenagers do. No, Loki had a *daddy* of his own to keep happy; he was the breadwinner, he had to work. He had to be an adult while still inhabiting a child's body.

It was inevitable. By the time Odin died Loki's mom was nearing middle-age. She wasn't able to attract the same calibre of clientele she used to. She resorted to streetwalking for a while, but that got too rough, and Loki hated her doing it. They both knew Loki would have to start sometime; he was their best shot at finding another daddy. And find one Loki did, without much concerted effort on his part. There must be something about him that screams *sex worker*. Maybe it's the way he dresses, or acts, or talks. Even when he was thirteen, people could tell. People can always tell. *Naturally provocative*, as Mr. Bee said. Like it's in his DNA or something.

Well, whether or not that's true, Loki sure turned out to be particularly adept at whoring. Not for nothing he was Sunny's best boy. His favourite, his star.

Loki will find a way to get that sample. He has to.

By the fourth day, Loki starts to get really antsy. The clock is ticking. He's procrastinated long enough; he can't afford to waste much more time.

He is stymied by the fact that all Moo wants to do is watch movies. Loki is able to distract him for brief periods of time with card tricks, but that's about it. He can't seem to translate that interest into sexual mojo; the best he can do is get Moo to pet his hair.

Moo presents Loki with yet another VHS tape. Loki ignores it.

"Hey Moo. I just want to say how nice it's been to hang out with you," Loki says this and more or less means it. There's nothing about this situation that's insurmountably unpalatable, aside from Moo's grotesque looks and the deadline hanging over Loki's head. Moo really does seem quite gentle, even childlike. Loki feels bad for him.

Moo holds out the VHS tape more insistently.

“Yeah. Y’know, I was thinking we could talk for a bit.” He pauses, realizing he has nothing to say, and neither does Moo - literally. "Uh, who's your favourite movie star?"

Moo gestures at a buxom dark-haired female actress on one of his posters and makes a guttural sound.

"I kinda look like her, hey?" Loki says, though he doesn't truly think so. "Maybe even more if I styled my hair like that, with the waves. I'm not as pretty as that."

Loki takes Moo's hand and puts it on his chest, as if he had tits.

“It’s okay, you can touch me. Here. Like this.”

The look on Moo’s face is unsure, even a bit spooked. His one good eye flits back and forth. But he doesn't retract his hand. Emboldened, Loki slips Moo’s hand under his shirt so that Moo is touching his bare skin, over his right nipple. Moo’s hand is cold and clammy, but Loki holds it firmly in place so Moo can't pull away.

“See? Not so bad. That feels nice, yeah? Mm, I like it when you touch me like that."

Loki allows Moo time to get accustomed to this. Baby steps - that’s what Moo needs. He’s not the *jump-in-feet-first* type of client. Loki’s fucked virgins before. He knows how to take it slow.

Moo’s hand slides towards his ribs. Loki jerks away slightly and giggles.

“That tickles!”

Either Moo doesn’t understand what that means or he doesn’t care, because now it seems he’s learned a funny trick. He jabs Loki in the ribs with his fingers again, this time on purpose. Loki laughs, mostly in discomfort, and braces his arms tightly against his sides so Moo can’t do it again.

“Moo, stop. Seriously. Here.” Loki pulls off his shirt. He hopes this is enough to distract Moo and keep his fingers out of Loki’s ribs. Loki cups his chest to compensate for the very obvious fact that he doesn’t have breasts. Loki’s been called girly before - he knows he’s somewhat androgynous looking, and he doesn’t really mind playing up his feminine side when the situation calls for it. He hopes this is enough to pique Moo’s interest, since Moo quite clearly prefers women. But even if it wasn’t, Loki has done far more degrading things during tricks.

Loki sinks to his knees and peers up at Moo owlishly. He knows what he looks like: servile and willing and receptive. Even straight men aren’t completely immune. Most straight men, anyway. In Loki’s experience, straight men just want someone to dominate.

Moo is not like that, although he’s a veritable giant from this angle, and rather terrifying. But Loki is not afraid of him anymore - not really. Moo is probably the least monstrous person in this building.

“Do you want to touch my hair?” Loki encourages. “Go on, touch my hair.”

Moo reaches out and pats his head, then takes a stray tendril and rolls it curiously between his fingertips. Loki keeps cupping his chest and even goes so far as to press his pecs together to muster up a semblance of cleavage - something he has, regrettably, done before. He certainly isn’t as well-endowed as Moo’s actresses, but what he lacks in tit size he can make up in sheer force of will.

As Moo’s fingers trail downwards they catch on Loki’s lips, and Loki takes the opportunity to lick at them with his tongue. Loki hopes that the feeling of his soft, warm tongue will inspire Moo to passion. And indeed, Moo is captivated by this - moreso when Loki does it and looks up at him at the same time.

Loki reaches for Moo’s sweats. In his *voice* he says, “It would feel even better if I-”

Moo curls away.

Loki huffs out a frustrated plea. “Moo, please. Can you let me just -”

Moo is already stubbornly plunking himself down in his recliner. Loki could scream. But what could he do? It’s not like Loki could force him.

Loki tugs his shirt back on, fishes out his inhaler from his jeans pocket and takes a puff on it, then plops down on the couch. It's silly, but he's starting to feel rather....rejected. What's wrong with him, anyway? He doesn't usually have this much trouble getting laid. It was never a problem for him before he came to the Compound. This is probably the longest he's ever gone without having sex.

Loki watches the television blearily without paying much attention. The stories and characters start to blur together in his mind, until he can't really distinguish one movie from another. It's the same stupid contrived love stories and tropes rehashed over and over again. Then a sweeping cityscape catches his eye. Loki recognizes it at once, and he bolts upright.

"I've been there! I've been there. Right where that was filmed, on the pier. [REDACTED]. I used to live there."

Moo just looks at him. It occurs to Loki, suddenly, that Moo doesn't know that movies are *filmed*, with actors and sets, with scripts and editing and lighting and score. Why would he? It doesn't seem like he's ever left this room.

"You know, I was in a few movies."

Moo stares at him, so Loki prattles:

"Yeah. Not famous ones like the ones you got, but uh. I was put in front of a camera. That's how movies are made. The camera records you and you say lines and stuff. You play a character and pretend to feel what they feel. That's what she's doing." He points to the leading lady on the screen. "She's an actress. She's playing a character and reciting lines from a script. But that's not who she really is. She actually lives out here, in the real world." Loki elects not to mention that that actress is probably dead by now. "And [REDACTED] is a real place you can go. It's not just on a tape. You walk down the pier and get cheap hot dogs and mini donuts."

Moo makes a curious noise and gestures at Loki.

"Yeah, me. I'm not sure you'd like the kinds of movies I made. Or maybe you would, I dunno." Loki huffs out a laugh. This entire conversation - this situation - is *absurd*. "I played a character too. But that character wasn't me. Right? It's made up. It's a fantasy. That's what movies are. They're *like* real life, but they're not exactly real. They're made. It's hard to explain...."

Moo keeps staring at him, not really comprehending.

"Don't you understand? There's a whole world outside this place. Outside this room. The *real* world. Don't you ever wonder about it? About what it's like outside of here?"

All Loki gets is Moo's mildly stupefied look. It's like talking to a fish in a tank. Loki might as well be speaking an alien language.

"Why are you down here, anyway?" Loki asks, half in frustration. It's not like Moo can answer.

.....Which is why he is completely blindsided when Moo leans over, grabs the blank notebook and pen that was on his side-table, scribbles something, and passes it to Loki. A note. Moo can *write*.

Loki takes one look at the chicken-scratch handwriting and has to laugh at the supreme joke that is his life.

"I can't read."

In one swift motion, Moo snatches the notebook back, tears out the page, stuffs it in his mouth and swallows it. Loki watches this in utter bafflement until he realizes why: whatever he'd written, he didn't want Dr. Duntsch or the orderlies to see.

"Okay..." Loki is dumbstruck. This is the first indication that there's someone *in there*, and moreover, that that someone knows what any of this is about. Loki lowers his voice to nearly a whisper: "So there's a point to all this? Do you know, Moo?"

Loki only expects maybe a vague noise at most, since Moo can't speak and Loki can't read. But then Moo starts scribbling something else on the notebook.

Loki cranes his neck to see. It's a drawing this time. The spider-like shape is unmistakable.

"*The Rig?*" Loki breathes. "Is that what this is, Moo?"

Moo starts to violently thrash, rocking his recliner back and forth. Drool flies everywhere. He cries out, a wretched groaning pained sound, and shakes his head from side to side. He looks like he'll snap his own neck.

"Sorry! Sorry, I'm sorry. Hey! Take it easy. It's okay. Shh. It's okay-"

Moo snatches the drawing right out of Loki's hand and eats that too. Loki can only watch, bewildered and helpless. After the drawing is safely ingested, Moo settles back into his recliner, calm, as if none of that had happened. He reaches for his glass of orange juice and takes a sip through the straw - a chaser for the paper he'd just ate.

Loki has to take a few seconds. "Uh, I didn't mean to upset you. I'm just trying to understand. This place is very strange to me. I don't really know what I'm doing here...."

Moo points at himself.

"Yeah, you. I'm supposed to uh. Get a sample from you. But beyond that..." Loki's voice trails off. He doesn't want to say something that would upset Moo and trigger another fit. Which poses quite the dilemma, because a new, more disturbing question has now been raised: *How the ever-loving fuck does Moo know about the Rig?*

"....I'm here to be your friend," is what Loki ends up saying.

Moo makes an eager, even excited gurgling noise of assent. Loki blurts out a nervous little laugh, mostly because he's still pretty freaked out.

"Yeah, we're friends, buddy. We're friends."

Later, Moo is sleeping in his recliner, a long line of drool hanging from his lower lip and looking, for all intents and purposes, like a big dumb ox. Loki wishes he could peer into that thick, bulbous skull for himself. Crack his brain open and see what secrets are being kept inside.

What do you know?

Day five and Loki hasn't slept at all. More and more he's thinking it was stupid of him to come back here. He wonders if he can ask Duntsch for an extension. Maybe if Loki asked *real nice*...

This is what Loki is thinking as he stares ahead at the television screen. The movie ends and Loki couldn't say a single thing about it, so little was he paying attention.

Moo is up out of his recliner to select another video cassette. He makes his pick and presents it to Loki.

"This one, Moo?" Loki sighs. He hauls himself up off the couch to plug the tape into the VCR. He rewinds it and hits play.

Loki gets up to go back to his spot on the couch. Moo's still up. Up and in Loki's way. He jabs Loki in the ribs.

Loki giggles, despite his irritation. He is *not* in the mood for being tickled. "Cut it out, Moo."

Moo does it again. Loki bats him away and laughs again despite himself.

"Stop it. I mean it."

Moo stares at him as if entranced, even mesmerized. It's entirely a different kind of stare than his normal blank gaze. Loki has a realization: it's his *smile*. Moo likes to see him smile. That's why he's been tickling him. Moo's trying to *cheer him up*, in the only way he knows how. Any normal person could tell Loki hates being tickled and that his laugh is one of discomfort. But Moo isn't exactly a normal person. It's not his fault he can't read social cues.

Loki keeps holding his smile long after it stops feeling natural. Moo does something like smile back at him, although it's more like a weird, pulled-back grimace. He's clearly more interested in Loki's smile than the movie that's begun playing, and he isn't trying to tickle Loki anymore, so

Loki keeps doing it. It feels weird to hold a smile and eye contact for this long. Most people think Loki stares too much. Moo must not be smiled at often for him to find it this captivating.

Loki has a sudden revelation: *Fuck him with love*. That's what Mrs. White said.

"You don't have to tickle me to get me to smile," Loki says, still smiling. "Hey, buddy?"

Moo wheezes at him and makes a nondescript gurgling noise.

"Yeah, I'm happy. You're happy too. We're all very, very happy. Why dontcha sit down."

Loki guides Moo back down in his recliner and kneels down between his spindly legs, all while smiling and maintaining eye contact. Tentatively, Loki reaches for the waistband of Moo's sweats and thrills when Moo doesn't bat him away. His cheeks are starting to hurt. Smiling this long feels forced and unnatural, but Moo can't seem to tell the difference. He's enchanted. Loki takes Moo's soft dick in-hand and begins to stroke it. Miracles of miracles, Loki manages to get it hard.

"Does that feel good? I'm happiest when you feel good."

Loki intended to try blowing Moo again, but Moo seems to like this *much* more, and Loki is more than fine with not escalating things further. Loki spits in his hand to allow a smoother glide. He keeps smiling, keeps looking Moo in the eye. He doesn't think Moo's ever been this hard for him.

Moo grunts and starts to cum in Loki's hand.

"Oh!" Loki cries out in surprise. He does his best to cup the semen in his hand as it spurts out of Moo's dick.

At that very moment, Dr. Duntsch and two orderlies barge through the door with their sample collection cups.

'I could kiss you," Black says, elated. He grips Loki by the shoulders and gives him a triumphant shake. "You got a sample! You must be a hellova fuck, son."

He ushers Loki into his office. As before, Loki had been escorted straight to Black once he disembarked from the Compound transport. Loki is just as nervous this time, despite the success he'd had. Black is not the kind of man around whom one can easily relax.

"I'm feeling celebratory. I got the good stuff right here..." Black selects a bottle from inside a small liquor cabinet and two shot glasses. He pours a generous helping of liquor in each. "Who would've thought ol' Moo had it in him. God, we tried everything. Boys, girls, thin, fat. But you - I *knew* you were somethin' special! I love being proven right. Mazel tov."

Black does the shot and Loki follows suit. It's smokey but smooth - a mezcal, Loki thinks. Sunny used to drink mezcal.

"You'll be pleased to know that White has put up the funds for Red's treatment. I've released him to [REDACTED] for oral surgery. He's there now. Had to put him under for the trip, though - he's a little on-edge these days. He'll be thrilled when he wakes up, I'm sure. I'm told they'll be able to save most of his teeth. They've had to extract a few, but not so much that he won't still be handsome for ya, how 'bout that."

Loki is beyond relieved to hear this. "Thank you, sir. Thank you."

"Oh, don't thank me. Thank yourself. And Boss White. I simply nudged the process along, pulled a few strings where I could. I'm not the heartless boogeyman people make me out to be, you know. I *care*, Loki." He puts his hand over his heart in earnestness. "My hope is that this will help pull Red out of his funk. I know his teeth were bothering him a lot. It hurt me to watch him suffer. As I said, Red's like a son to me. I've invested a lot into him over the years. And I'm not about to let his potential go to waste over a few rotten teeth. He has a promising future here, if he can keep his shit together." Black's voice had turned reflective, but he brightens as he focuses his attention back on Loki: "But, as much as I like Red, that business with Moo - *that's* the real victory. Was that your weirdest trick, son?"

"Pretty much," Loki says, and Black laughs.

“No doubt! No doubt. I’d be worried if it wasn’t. I realize that all must’ve come off as a tad.....unseemly.....but it’s in the service of something truly great. History will remember us for what we’ve accomplished. And you were integral to the process. You should be proud.”

This statement hits Loki like a physical blow. He hadn’t really considered that he was somehow contributing to this....operation. It makes him feel the opposite of proud. In fact it makes him feel sick to his stomach, even winded, like he’d been sucker punched right in the gut. But what else could he do? He couldn’t just let Thor suffer.

"Um, what exactly are we trying to accomplish, sir?"

“There you go, asking questions again!” Black wags his finger at Loki in a cheeky reprimand. “You should’ve learned by now that that can get you in hot water. I’m gonna let that one slide, because I know you’re tired and not thinking straight. But I will say this: if things keep goin’ the way they’re goin’, everything will be made clear very soon.” His smile deepens into something secretive and unnerving, like a magician who has all the pieces in place and is about to perform a masterful illusion. “In the meantime, I don’t think I need to remind you that you’d best continue to keep your mouth shut about Moo and the Big House. Best to forget all about it, really. Mooncalf is no longer of any concern to you.”

Loki nods, even though it’s unlikely that he’ll be forgetting about Moo anytime soon. What’ll happen to him now? Will he be stuck in that lab forever? And *why the fuck did they need a semen sample so bad?* Loki was put back on the transport back to the Compound immediately after he’d made Moo ejaculate. As he was being hauled out of the lab, Loki could hear Moo wailing after him, a horrid sad animal-like moaning noise.

"You deserve a little somethin' for your trouble, dontcha think? I believe in rewarding a job well done. How was that shot earlier?"

“It was good, sir.”

“Let me get you another,” Black says, and it doesn’t sound optional. This time he only pours out one shot - into Loki’s glass.

“Don’t touch it yet! Let’s make it fun. Let’s play a game - I call it Shot of Truth. Cheesy, but humor me if you please. This is how it works. I say a statement like, *Loki works at the canteen*. That’s false, so you don’t do the shot. Then I say, *Loki works at the brothel*. Now, that ain’t true neither, as much as some guys round here might like that. So you don’t gotta take the shot. You see? But if I say, *Loki works at the laundry* - well, that’s true, ain’t it? What are you gonna haveta do? Use

those smarts of yours."

Loki gets the sense that Black's making fun of him. "Take a shot."

Black claps his hands. "Take a shot! Clever boy. Now, I want you to consider your answers very carefully. Very carefully indeed, Loki, I cannot stress that enough. Because if I catch you in a lie I will be quite cross." He smiles winsomely. "Let's start easy. Hmm? What's your favourite colour? Is it blue?"

Loki already dislikes this. He squirms in his seat. "Uh--"

"No, no! Let me guess. Do the shot if I guess right. That's how this game is played. Is it yellow? It's not *red*, is it?" He says this with something of an eyebrow waggle. "How about green?"

Loki hesitantly does the shot. It slides down his throat and settles listlessly in his stomach.

"Green!" Black exclaims. "Fascinating. Just like your eyes, huh? I'm going to jot that down." He writes a note in what must be Loki's file. "All information is interesting, Loki. Yes, even your favourite colour. You know how they say, *less is more*? That might be true in lotsa cases, but not when it comes to information. When it comes to information, *more is more*." Black pours another shot in Loki's tumbler. "It's good, huh? Straight from [REDACTED]. None of that garbage from the commissary, that stuff'll thin paint. Okay, that was the practice round. Let's try something a little bit harder. Are you illiterate, Loki."

Loki is taken aback. At once he feels even more uncomfortable.

"Don't be shy, kiddo. No shame in it; lots of your kind are. I'm just curious. Could you read, say, a recipe?"

"Um, no, not really."

"Not really?"

"I might be able to hash it out if I really tried, but I get letters confused, sir."

"I'd like to see you try," says Black. He gets up, selects a book from on top of his filing cabinet, opens it to a random page, and tosses it in front of Loki. "Here. Read this for me please."

"Sir-"

"Do your best. Sound it out."

And so, Loki tries, phonetically parsing out each word letter by letter and stumbling over his own tongue. It's a tough slog. He's always had a hard time distinguishing 'd's from 'b's and 'p's from 'q's. The type is small, without much space between words, making it hard for Loki to even distinguish one word from another. Moreover, having Black listening to him makes him anxious, and it's consequently affecting his ability to concentrate.

Loki comes upon a long, obscure-looking word and stops. He simply can't do it. He looks down at his lap, humiliated and on the verge of tears.

"Keep going," Black prompts, his nose scrunched up from having taken a hit of snuff.

Loki closes his eyes for a brief moment and forces himself onwards, bludgeoning through sentences like a sledgehammer. The words coming out of his mouth just sound like garbled gibberish to him. He's not even sure where he left off, or even if he's reading the same lines over and over again.

"That's enough." Black says, after what feels like an agonizingly long time. He takes the book back and slams it closed. "Could you summarize what you just read for me."

Loki blinks. Of course he couldn't. Didn't Black hear him struggle? He might as well have been reading Chinese. He was so busy trying to sound out words, he hadn't focused at all on the content.

"What about for a new sweater?" Black coaxes. "Or tea kettle? Just a few takeaways. A general gist. Anything."

Loki wipes a stray tear from his cheek with his sleeve. Shame wracks him to his core. He shakes

his head.

Black smiles at him comfortingly. "I'm not trying to make you feel bad, sweetheart, I'm just trying to get a better understanding of where you're at. What's a pretty boy like you be needin' to read for, anyway? You just need your husband to take care of you. Right?"

He pauses. He's waiting for Loki to agree.

"Right," Loki forces himself to say.

Black keeps smiling, but his expression shifts, just barely, such that his eyes become hard and unyielding. "Next question. Did Mooncalf try to communicate with you at all during your stay."

All at once, Loki realizes where Black was going with this little reading exercise.

"He wrote me a note, sir, but I couldn't read it. I promise you I couldn't read it. Handwriting is especially hard for me, way harder than print. I didn't even get a chance to try. He ate the note before I could look at it. I can't read sir. You heard me just now - I can't - I wish I could -"

Black holds up his hand, and Loki falls silent.

"Do the shot."

Loki does. This one goes down less easy, but at the same time, he's never been so relieved to have proven himself illiterate. Black makes a few notes in Loki's file.

"You're just the kind of wife I want for my soldiers. Nice and compliant. That last wife of Red's, she was a little uppity, if you know what I mean. Too smart for her own good. I've told you before I'm glad Red has you now. Much better to have an uneducated whore at home. Keeps things more peaceable. You been keepin' an eye on him for me like I asked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then perhaps you could tell me how many episodes he's had."

"Episodes?" Loki echoes weakly.

"Episodes. Panic attacks. Our game's not over, Loki. Do the shot if he's had more than three."

Loki's heart sinks. He thought Black was done toying with him. He does the shot, and Black pours him another.

"More than ten that you've seen?"

Loki is afraid to say anything so he shakes his head. The motion makes him dizzy; he's starting to get quite drunk. It makes Loki nervous to be getting this inebriated alone with Black.

"When he has his episodes, does he talk about killing himself."

"I - I don't think he would, sir-"

Black's voice is a bark: loud and jarring and perfectly even. "That's not what I asked. I asked, does Red talk about killing himself. Do the shot for yes."

Loki does the shot. It makes him cough and he wipes his mouth with his sleeve. The booze is not settling in his stomach, and it's making Loki feel ill.

"I would dissuade him from going that route, if I were you," says Black in his normal voice. He makes a few more notes. "During his episodes, does Red ever have coughing fits."

"I don't know, sir. Please-"

"Answer."

Loki takes a deep shaky breath. "He coughs, yeah, but he's a smoker. I really don't know. I guess so?"

"Do the shot."

Loki's vision is swimming. The mezcal is potent, and each shot is at least a double. Moreover, Loki hadn't eaten anything since breakfast with Moo that morning. The alcohol's hitting him extra hard.

"How are you feeling? A little tipsy? Don't worry, we're almost done. I only got one more question for ya." Black leans forward in his desk, his hands clasped intently in front of him. "Does Red think Jane is on the Rig."

Loki freezes. The sound of his own heartbeat is pulsing in his ears, and it isn't entirely because of the booze.

"Does Red think Jane's on the Rig, Loki. Remember what I said about lying."

Loki can't say it. Instead, he slowly raises the glass to his lips, tips his head back and downs the shot. This one hits him hardest of all, and he slumps over in his chair.

"Well, I think you've celebrated enough," says Black curtly. "You've been most helpful. I'll write you up a note for a thousand credits. How about that, hmm? Just in time for Christmas."

There are two of Black's soldiers behind Loki; he doesn't know at what point they came in.

"Wait-" Loki blurts out, confused and panicked. "Wait-"

They grab Loki by the upper arms and Loki starts to thrash reflexively, but he's slight and uncoordinated and the men haul him up without much effort.

"Calm down, there, kiddo," Black murmurs as he moseys over to tuck the credit note in Loki's breast pocket. He gives Loki's cheek a playful slap and smiles, though his eyes are dark and predatory. "Throwin' a fit like I'm gonna toss you to the Rig or somethin'."

"No!" Loki shouts. "Wait - Please -"

Black is already turning back towards his desk. He waves his hand over his shoulder. "Get him out of here."

Loki wakes up in his own bed as weak sunlight streams through the cabin window. His stomach roils when he realizes Thor's gone. He springs out of bed and rampages through the cabin in a panic. Then it all comes back to him:

Black sent Thor to get his teeth fixed.

Loki barely makes it to the bathroom before he throws up. He pants heavily and spits the rest of the bitter bile. He rests his head on the lip of the toilet seat, not having the energy to care about hygiene. His head throbs right behind his eyeballs. It's been awhile since he's been this hungover.

Loki notes, distantly, that he's still wearing his clothes from the day before. And there's something in his coat breast pocket: a credit note on what looks like Black's official stationary. Loki squints at it.

O-n-e. O-n-e. T-h-o-u-s-a-n-d. Th-ou-s-and. Thousand. One Thousand.

Loki forces himself to calm down. If Thor weren't alive Black wouldn't have any reason to give Loki credits, or return him home. He had to have been telling the truth about Thor's dental work. Thor will be back in a few days with his teeth fixed.

Loki just has to wait it out.

Sigryn seems subdued as Loki helps her fill pierogies. Usually she's bitching that Loki's crimp job

is sub-par, or that he's using too much filling, or that he isn't rolling the dough out thin enough. Loki is used to her haranguing him like this. They spend a lot of time making huge batches of soups and stews to split between their two households. The company is nice, but mostly Loki does it because he's keen to learn from her. She's the one who teaches him that food won't brown in the pan if it's too wet; that butter smokes at a lower temperature than lard, and that dry-brining a pork chop will help it stay moist when it's cooked.

It all started when Thor left for two weeks without a word. Not knowing where to go or who to turn to, he'd rushed to Sigryn's in a state of utter hysteria. She'd reassured him that Thor's abrupt absence was normal, that Commanders often went on assignment, and that there probably wasn't anything to worry about. To keep Loki occupied, she'd put him to work making pierogies, and Loki had been suckered into helping ever since. Loki is glad for it now. He could use the distraction.

"I think I'm pregnant," Sigryn tells him. She doesn't sound excited.

"Oh," is what Loki says.

"I can't keep it."

"Green?"

"No, he wants a kid. But I can't have a baby here. I just can't." She pauses. "Don't tell him, please."

Loki nods. He wouldn't even if Sigryn didn't have dirt on him too. Whores are not entirely without honour.

"What're you gonna do?"

"I'll go to Mamma. She's got pills. I've done it before. It fucking sucks. The worst goddamn cramps. I'll have to miss work too."

"I'm sorry, Sigryn."

Sigryn shrugs, but Loki can tell this is a bigger deal to her than she's willing to let on. "Whatever. It happens. You know how it is. Getting men to wrap their dicks is more trouble than it's worth. And sometimes you stay up all night drinkin' and laughin' and he's being sweet and you fall into bed...." She sighs and mops at her face with her sleeve. "You're lucky to be a boy. You don't have to worry about this kind of shit."

Loki smiles ruefully. "You'd wanna take it in the ass every time instead?"

Sigryn sob-laughes at the crude insider joke. "Reckon not." She shakes herself out and smiles, like a bandaid slapped over a gaping bloody wound. "I'll be fine. I just get weepy sometimes. Green'll get promoted one day, I'm sure of it. We'll be moved off-Compound. It'll be better. We'll have a family then."

Loki smiles back at her absently, but a niggling worry settles in his brain: isn't that the same promotion Thor's going for?

"Well, if you need anything...."

Sigryn gestures at Loki's tray of pierogies. "I need you to go faster. You've only finished half a tray? For fuck's sake, pick up the pace. And look at these ones! How am I supposed to sell these."

"I can either go fast or have them look good. Can't have it both ways."

"These ones aren't even sealed all the way. They'll burst when we boil them. And don't think I haven't noticed you eating my filling, you whore. You know how long it took me to skim that much cheese from the canteen?"

Loki has to smile. Sigryn is nothing if not resilient. Her pierogies are Compound-famous, and she makes a pretty good profit selling frozen bags of them out of her kitchen window. Many of the wives here have their own food-based side hustles: pastries, pies (Sigryn confirms that mock-apple pie is a legit thing) dumplings, jams, raviolis, even ice cream in the summer. The demand for these goods is high for one crucial reason: well-fed soldiers are calm soldiers. A good meal does a lot to assuage the inherent shittiness of day-to-day Compound life. It's not a bad way to earn credits, and much less risky than tricking on the side. The only downside is that pierogies are a *massive* amount of fiddly, repetitive, tedious, boring work.

"How many of these do we gotta make."

“At least five hundred credits’ worth. I have to earn enough to buy the pills from Mamma. And I need to do it fast, before I’m too far along for them to work. So chop-chop.”

Loki remembers he has the credits - one thousand from Black. Shamefully, he doesn’t want to share them. But then he thinks of how much Sigryn has helped him adjust to Compound life. She didn’t have to take him under her wing like that. Loki feels guilty for being so selfish.

“I have credits from working on the labor team. I’ll get you the pills.”

“What? You will?”

“Sure,” Loki sighs.

“What’s the catch?”

“No catch! Jesus Christ. I just want to help you. Bitch.”

Sigryn smiles wryly and embraces him, chest to chest. Loki likes the way she hugs. She’s not afraid to hold on for a long while.

“You couldda told me that before I stole all this cheese,” she says into his ear.

Loki laughs and shoves her off. “Okay, you’re welcome.”

“I’ll pay you back. Promise.”

“Just let me take some of these home.”

They settle back into pierogi assembly. Sigryn brings her huge pot of water to a rolling boil and begins to lay pierogies in them, about a dozen or so at a time, and then fishes them out once they start to float.

“I really do appreciate it. I know it’s expensive.”

“Everything here is expensive,” Loki mutters under his breath.

“Yeah, well. Mamma’s got to pay her mule plus take a cut for herself. The dispensary never has birth control in stock, so Mamma smuggles it in special for us. I think it’s cos they want to keep us birthin’ babies. It’s a goddamn conspiracy. So I don’t mind payin’ her extra for her trouble. She’s got to support herself, you know? She can get condoms too if you need them....”

Loki shrugs. He doesn’t want to say he doesn’t need condoms because he isn’t actually having sex.

“....But her main hustle is love magic, obviously.”

Loki looks up from the mangled pierogi he’s trying to salvage from absolute disaster. "That's actually a thing?"

Sigryn regards him flatly. “You’re kidding, right.”

Once it becomes clear that Loki *isn’t* kidding, her face morphs from incredulity to literal outrage.

“Of course it's a *thing*! Where did you trick, anyway?"

“██████████, mostly.”

“And you’ve *never* heard of love magic.”

“I’ve heard of it, yeah,” Loki huffs. “But I thought it was...I dunno. An urban legend, or something.”

"You had a pimp, didn't you."

Loki's brow furrows. He wonders what that has to do with anything.

"Yeah...."

Sigryn's eyes glint. "*That's* why. Pimps hate love magic. They try to keep their stable from it. They're scared of it. *Men* are scared of it. it's the most powerful magic there is. Pimps try to keep that knowledge from us to keep us under their control. Didn't your mom teach you that?"

Loki frowns. His mother warned him to never associate with pimps, but that was the extent of it.

"If you ran with a madam, you'd know just how real it is," Sigryn goes on, sing-song, like the know-it-all she is. "Better if your madam's a witch."

"Is Mamma a witch?"

"No, she just likes growing plants underground for her moon-altar. Of course she's a witch. And not just *any* witch: she's the best witch I've ever seen. I'd trick under her if I ever got out of here. I would kill for her. And she'd kill for me. Even Black leaves her alone. He won't cross her."

Loki finds that hard to believe. He can't imagine Black being wary of anyone, let alone the Compound brothel's aging madam.

"D'you think she could curse him for me," Loki grumbles as he crimps his pierogi with a little too much enthusiasm.

"Who says he ain't already cursed?" Sigryn's lips twist into a feral grin. "No, Mamma's expertise is in love magic - a very particular kind of love magic specific to us sex workers. And she's powerful, Loki. Rumor has it that she trained under the head priestess of Crescent City Coven."

Loki looks at her dubiously. "You really expect me to believe all that."

"How d'you think I got Green to marry me?" Sigryn says - a *gotcha* if ever there was one, and she

knows it. "I wanted to be a soldier's wife, y'know? Respectable. He tricked with me a few times and it was okay. He wasn't bad looking and he didn't seem mean. So I got Mamma to make me a spell to snare him. And here we are."

Loki can't say he isn't intrigued. Sigryn is one of the few Compound wives who is *literally* married to their soldier - with a ring and everything. Sigryn flaunts this as her greatest accomplishment, and with good reason: Loki knows how hard it is for anyone of their caste to get respectably married. His own mother couldn't swing it, and she was with Odin for almost a decade.

"What kind of a spell...."

Sigryn grins, toothy. "Oh-ho! Not so dismissive now, are ya bitch. This ain't one of your card tricks, Loki. This is the real shit. *Witchcraft*. You don't fuck with it lightly. If I told you what I did it would jeopardize the spell's potency. Don't you know anything?"

Loki flinches and looks away.

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It ain't your fault you don't know. Fucking pimps. Keeping us from our birthrights."

Loki *really* needs to change the subject, so he says, "So that's what the plants growing in the brothel basement are for? Witchcraft?"

Sigryn nods as tosses yet more pierogies into the pot. "Alkanet. The root is used for red dye. You can make lip tints and rouge and stuff with it. Mamma's alkanet has special properties. She uses some form of it in almost all her spells. And she customizes each spell based on the target, so no two spells are ever the same."

Loki mulls on this. The brothel basement *did* have a bit of a witchy vibe going on. Then again, Loki's never been associated with a coven before, so he's not exactly sure what to expect.

"If your mom was kept for so long I bet she was a practitioner."

Loki bristles at the insinuation. "My mom didn't need to put no *love spell* on our daddy to stay kept. He loved us. Well, he loved her."

"Sure. Just like how Green loves me."

"My mom didn't do that stuff," Loki says forcefully. He feels an acute need to defend his mother's relationship with Odin. It comforts him to believe that their relationship was built on genuine affection for one another - not because his mother had cast some *love spell*. "I'm not saying love magic isn't a thing, or that there's anything wrong with it, I'm just saying I don't think she did it."

Sigryn shrugs and scoops out another batch of floating pierogis. "Well, some of us need a bit of extra help. I ain't ashamed to admit it. Every new moon I renew my spell. It keeps Green from straying from my bed." Her hand goes to rest on her lower stomach, and she snorts mirthlessly. "Works a little too well, sometimes."

"It makes Green sleep with you?"

Sigryn's lips twitch. "Y'know, more and more I'm beginning to suspect you're lookin' to put a spell on Red."

Loki feels his cheeks heat.

Sigryn punches him in the shoulder. "You are! You *like* him."

"Shut up."

"What? I don't blame you. He's handsome. I never minded tricking with him."

Loki clenches his jaw. He hates that Sigryn has slept with Thor and he hasn't.

"You're already his wife, dunno what you'd need a spell fer," Sigryn goes on. "You've got it made. He doesn't even cheat on you or nothin'. He doesn't beat you."

He won't sleep with me neither.

"He's not over Jane," is what Loki says.

"Well jeez, didn't she, like, just die? Cut him some slack."

"You didn't even like Jane," Loki reminds her. "You called her stuck-up."

"So? She *was* stuck-up. It still sucks that she died. Pass me that empty tray, please." Sigryn takes it and lays her latest batch of freshly-boiled pierogies on it. "Well, if you decide to stop being so high n' mighty, I'm sure Mamma would help you if you ask. She likes you. She was very impressed by your scream. It was powerful, she said."

Loki is not sure what to make of that, so he says, "She gave me a compass after you left."

"She gave you a *talisman*? Can I see it?"

Loki reaches into his jeans pocket and pulls out the little compass. He passes it to Sigryn, who inspects it closely.

"If she gave this to you, it means it's important. You're supposed to have it."

"It doesn't work."

Sigryn frowns. "No, that way is north." She gestures to her front window. "It's pointing towards..."

Sigryn shudders, suddenly and very visibly. She tosses the compass back to Loki.

"It's your talisman, I shouldn't be touching it. Keep it safe."

It's then that Green comes in through the front door, shaking the snow off his shoulders like a dog. He must be used to Sigryn's pierogi-making, because he doesn't so much as bat an eye at the chaotic state his kitchen is currently in. There are trays and trays of pierogis on every possible surface, including the chairs. A daunting amount of dirty dishes are heaped in the sink.

Sigryn wipes her hands on her apron and goes to help Green out of his coat. "Hey babe. How was your day?"

"Fine," says Green, eyeing Loki.

"Loki and me was just making some pierogis. Want me to fry you up some?"

Green's eyes narrow further. "He sure seems to be hanging out around here a lot lately."

Loki can sense the undercurrent of suspicion laden in his words. Best to nip that right in the bud, in as blunt a manner as possible.

"I'm a fag, sir," is what Loki says. He hates using that word, but he'd rather say it himself than have it levelled against him. "I'm Red's wife."

"Didn't take Red to be no queer."

"He's not. He's the man."

Green gets right up into Loki's face, such that Loki can smell the musty, wet odor of him. "That's funny cos I heard you and Red was arguing in the front courtyard last week. Doesn't sound like no man to me."

"Jesus Christ," Sigryn mutters as she wedges herself between the two of them. "Loki and me are just friends. He's helping me with my pierogis. He's doing me a *favour*. Go have a shower. You stink."

Amazingly, Green actually backs down without any fuss.

"Finish up," Green says as he heads towards the bathroom. "Then Loki goes home."

Thor is returned home the next day. Loki has almost never been so happy to see him.

He's drugged to high heaven, so much so that the two soldiers hauling him in have to physically deposit Thor in their bed. Thor's face is puffy, and he's drooling both from the copious anaesthesia and the gauze they'd stuffed in his mouth, but he's hale and whole, and most importantly, safe. Loki is even grateful for the opportunity to help Thor change his gauze dressing, although it's covered in blood and viscous saliva and is frankly quite gross.

Thor spends his first few days back lazing in bed, drugged up on painkillers and looking like a strung-out chipmunk. Loki would laugh if it wasn't so pitiful. Where he can, Loki comes in to check on Thor and to switch out the bag of frozen peas Thor's been holding to his cheek. Within a few days, Thor's looking much better. The swelling has gone down significantly, and he tentatively begins to chew soft foods. The pierogies are especially good for this. (Sigryn had let Loki take all the ugly ones he'd fucked up.)

Even without all the gauze packed in his mouth, Thor is quiet - much quieter than usual. He's polite and soft-spoken when Loki talks to him, and taciturn otherwise. He says nothing about his time away other than that he feels like he was treated well. The way he speaks, with his mouth taut and closed-lipped, gives Loki the impression that Thor is self-conscious about his new missing teeth, so much so that Loki can't quite tell what the damage is.

"Can I see?" Loki eventually asks.

Thor reluctantly pulls back his lips to expose his teeth. It looks like they mostly pulled his back right molars, but there are definitely a few new gaps in his smile. His gums are pretty raw looking too.

"They'll grow back, right?" Thor says - a joke, plaintive yet poignant and utterly heartbreaking.

Loki feels like he could cry but he smiles instead. "You look great. Really. How does it feel?"

"Still sore," admits Thor, "But better. A lot better."

Loki rubs his back. If he's not in pain, then that's all that matters.

Later, they're in bed. Thor rolls on his side and props himself up so that his face is hovering over Loki's.

"You got my teeth fixed." It's not a question so much as a statement of fact.

Loki merely shrugs.

"Thank you," Thor says, looking at him intently, with intense gratitude and tenderness. It's making Loki feel hot all over.

"Yeah - sure." Loki smiles wanly. "Forget about it."

He tries to roll over, but Thor stops him by gently turning Loki's chin towards him with his fingertips.

"Thank you," Thor repeats, then dips down and places a kiss on Loki's lips.

From as far back as Loki remembers, Loki has always worshipped Thor.

There was never a time when Loki didn't consider Thor to be the most wonderful thing on two legs. Loki thinks he even felt that way upon *meeting* Thor - his earliest memory. Loki would've only been about four years old, yet he vividly recalls hiding behind his mother's legs when they were introduced. His mother tried to get him to say his own name, but Loki was much too shy for that. He thinks Thor was probably scowling at the time. Most of their subsequent interactions involved Thor ordering him around like a little servant, but Loki was only too happy to oblige. It's as if his life only truly began once Thor was in it. Even the stuff with Mr. Bee didn't bother Loki so much because of how it had brought him closer to Thor in the end.

Big brother Thor, who did cool things like go to school and smoke weed in his bedroom, who'd spend the weekends working on his dirtbike with metal music blaring from his boombox. Loki wanted him before he knew what a crush was, or even what sex was. Loki wanted Thor's attention. He wanted to press his body against Thor's and feel Thor's arms around him. He wanted to kiss him the way his mother kissed Odin.

Later, Thor got a muscle car. And after that, a girlfriend - Loki can't remember her name, but Loki once caught them fucking in the backseat of Thor's car. That memory was seared in Loki's brain like a brand, and fuelled his fantasies for years afterwards. But more than that, Loki remembers how tenderly Thor had held her afterwards, how they'd laughed together softly amongst themselves. Loki wanted *that* most of all.

The memory of him was so bittersweet, so tantalizing, for the simple reason that for twelve years Loki did not know for certain whether Thor was alive or dead. After his mother passed, Loki became even more obsessed with finding him. Every city he ever went to, Loki would check the local phone book in the off chance Thor's name might be in it. Every party he did with Sunny, Loki would scan the bodyguards and security in the vain hope that one of those mercenaries might be Thor.

Loki never thought about Thor when he was tricking. No - Loki could never sully Thor's memory that way. Loki only thought of him in the stillness of the late night, when he was in bed alone, when everything was quiet and he could focus the entirety of his cognitive faculties on reliving and preserving those few precious fleeting memories he had left. Sometimes he'd cry because he had trouble remembering Thor's beautiful face. Year by year, details would fade, until Thor was nothing but a shadow in Loki's mind. On nights like that, Loki wanted him so bad it physically ached.

This is why, when Thor kisses him, Loki is overcome by a feeling unlike any other. *Sublime*. It's better than Loki's ever dreamed. It was all worth it. Just for this it was all worth it.

Thor breaks the kiss. "I'm sorry, I should have asked - I just thought- "

"No, don't be sorry! You thought what?"

"Well -" Thor says, almost shy, "You kissed me before you left. Out in the yard."

Loki blushes. He'd all but forgotten he'd done that. It was in the heat of the moment.

"Yeah. Guess I did."

"Can I ask why?"

Because I've been in love with you since I was seven years old.

"I - I don't know," stammers Loki. "I wanted to."

Thor eyes him curiously. "...Do you want to now?"

"Yes," says Loki, and he can't pretend he doesn't mean it with his whole heart, his whole soul, his whole being, past and present.

Thor leans down and kisses him again, and Loki latches onto it at once. Unlike the kiss out in the yard, this one is deep, intimate, and languid. God, Loki wants this. He's wanted this for as long as he can remember. It's like being made whole for the first time ever, like restoring a piece of himself that had been missing his entire life. His eyes water with how badly he needs it. Gratefully, he wraps his arm around Thor's neck, tugging him closer so that he can better feel the warmth of Thor's mouth, the plushness of his lips, the scrape of his stubble against his skin. Thor is wonderfully responsive; he opens his mouth and allows Loki to lick into it. He's pliant but not passive, his soft wet lips clinging to Loki's, yielding eagerly to Loki's tongue.

Loki can feel Thor's cock through his sweatpants and is thrilled to find that he's erect. Loki switches to autopilot. Sex, he knows how to do. He *wants* to do it. He wants to please Thor. He wants Thor to like him. No - he wants Thor to *love* him. And if he can't get that, then this is the next best thing.

He reaches for Thor's dick.

"Stop." Thor's hand comes to rest over Loki's own. "Stop, stop."

Loki does stop. "What?"

Thor sort of laughs. He shifts uncomfortably. "....It's. I dunno. Weird."

“What’s weird? I know you’re hard, Thor.” Loki switches seamlessly and unthinkingly to *the voice*. “It’s okay to want this. I want it too. You deserve to have this. Don’t feel bad about taking it. I’ll give it to you good.”

“What I really meant was, *you’re* being weird!” Thor pulls away completely, and Loki can tell he’s upset. “The way you talk, the way you act - it’s like you’re a completely different person!”

“I’m sorry, I’ll tone it down. Would you prefer to take charge? I can play young.”

“See?! You see how fucked up you sound? *Play young?* What the fuck.”

Loki feels hot. He backtracks, “I just mean, I can pretend to be less experienced if you don’t wanna be reminded that I’m a sex worker.”

"You think *that’s* what’s bothering me about this? I know what you are, Loki. I don’t care about that. It’s that *act* you put on. It’s weird!”

“It’s what men want,” Loki says dumbly.

“And I’m like them, right? I’m just like every other sleazy john who’s ever picked you up?”

“No!” Loki sits up. “No, you’re not like that at all!”

“You got my teeth fixed, Loki. You don’t owe me anything else. Especially not sex. I’ve had enough of being laid out of a sense of duty.”

“I want to,” Loki insists. “I promise you that I want to. I like sex.”

“Yeah? What do you like about it?”

Loki’s mouth opens for a minute but nothing comes out.

“That’s what I thought,” Thor says bitterly. He lays down and rolls over. “Never mind.”

Loki gets out of bed and flees to the bathroom. He only barely makes it before his tears spill over and he starts to cry. He can’t help the way he is. Thor must think he’s a slut. Maybe Loki is. Maybe if he were less... *used*, Thor might want him. He just wants to please Thor, to make him happy. Loki would do anything. More and more Loki is beginning to think that simply won’t be happening.

There has to be something Loki can do.

Midnight. Loki makes his way through the Compound, his arms wrapped snug around himself to ward off the winter chill. When he reaches the brothel's back door he knocks the rhythm Sigryn had taught him. He hops on one foot to the other to keep blood flowing in his feet. It's freezing, and Loki blows into his mittens to warm his fingers. He does the knock again.

A thin, haggard blonde woman answers by pulling back the eye slot.

“Hi. It’s me. Uh, Red’s wife-”

“I remember,” she says, opening the door. Her eyes give Loki a brief, bored once-over. “She was wondering when you’d be back.”

The woman gestures him inside and leads him down into the basement. This time Loki pays special attention to the plants growing in alcoves of the basement wall: *Alkanet*.

“Loki,” coos a voice.

It’s Mamma. She comes right up to him and touches her forehead to his, just as she had done with Sigryn. Then she kisses him full on the mouth. Loki is too surprised and caught off guard to react, let alone say anything.

“My boy,” she beams as she pulls back. “Welcome. I was just thinking of you! How serendipitous that you should come this night.”

“Hi, uh, Mamma,” Loki says, squeaky. He can still feel the ghostly press of her lips against his own.

“How did you fare at the Big House?”

“It was okay.” Loki clears his throat. “Yeah. It, uh. Went well. The compass you gave me must be lucky or something.” He elects not to tell her that the compass doesn’t seem to work most of the time. Or at least, it didn’t work around Moo.

Mamma nods. “You looked like you were in need of some guidance. Like a lost lamb, so far removed from where you're supposed to be.”

Loki's not sure what to make of that cryptic throwaway line. The air of utter warmth and tenderness emanating off her is unmooring. It makes him want to both run away and fall into her arms like a child.

“Um. So Sigryn and I was talkin’, and, uh. She mentioned you did love magic?” Loki feels silly just saying it aloud. He scratches the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with this kinda stuff...”

"Yes, she tells me you had a pimp."

Sigryn, would it kill you to keep your fucking mouth shut.

“Uh, yeah,” Loki says.

She cups his cheek. Oh, my sweet child. My boy."

Loki brushes her off irritably. He knows that her pity is genuine and that she doesn't mean to be condescending, but it's hard not to take it that way. So Loki had a pimp. It's not like he had a ton of options out on the street, homeless and busking and doing his best not to get trafficked or killed.

That doesn't make him stupid.

"Sigryn said you made her a spell to get Green to marry her."

"That's right."

"How did you do that?"

"I cannot say. Each spell must be crafted and performed with extreme discretion."

Loki just comes out with it: "What if I told you I want to make Red love me."

Mamma seems surprised. "You are his wife."

"Yes, I know," says Loki impatiently, "But I want him to *love* me. I have credits, I can pay."

His determination seems to amuse her - but not in a mocking way, as it might for Black. She regards him fondly, if also somewhat poignantly.

"Girls here have tried, but it has never worked on Commander Red. He is strangely....immune. That only happens when the target's heart is already spoken for. I'm afraid it appears that your Red loves another."

Loki is crushed. It's Jane. It's gotta be Jane.

"Did Jane cast a love spell on him?"

"Jane?" Mamma's eyes fog over for a moment. "Oh, that's right. Jane. No, she was not one of us. She did not come to me. She did not believe in our ways."

So Thor just loved her fair and square. That makes Loki feel infinitely worse.

"So you can't help me?"

"I will meditate on it and consult the oracles. They might lend insight into your predicament...."

"Mamma?"

"Yes, my child."

"I want to scream again."

"Of course. For your mother?"

"No. This time for me."

“We should talk.”

Thor makes this announcement after Loki's done cleaning up after dinner the following evening. Loki hangs up the dishtowel and dutifully plunks himself down at their table next to him.

“I'm sorry for blowing up at you yesterday. I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings, or make you feel bad about what you are. A part of me still sees you as a little kid. You're not - I know you're not - but it's hard for me to turn that part of my brain off.”

Thor's leg jitters restlessly under the table.

"I guess I'm just sorry that...you've had to learn to do that kind of stuff to survive. You don't gotta do it with me, okay? You don't owe me sex."

"You saved me," says Loki in a small voice.

"Yeah, well. You got my teeth fixed. We're square."

Loki shakes his head. How can he explain? He doesn't just mean how Thor had saved him from the Rig - although that's certainly true too. He means *before*. And it's hard to pinpoint exactly when it all started. There were certainly instances before Mr. Bee moved in with them, when the man would hang around the garage and try to coax Loki alone with candies. But those memories are hazy in Loki's mind. What he *does* remember, is that Thor is the only other person who could tell there was something off about Mr. Bee. Thor knew without Loki even having to say a word.

Before Loki can speak, Thor continues: "Loki, I - I have to ask you something." His mouth opens, and closes. "Did you sleep with Boss White?"

"What?" Loki is taken aback. "*No*."

"Then what? What did they make you do?"

It would almost be funny to tell him. Loki doesn't know whether the truth would make Thor feel better or worse.

"I worked on a labour team."

Thor looks at him dubiously. "I *know* that's not true. I'm not an idiot. Be real."

Loki's lips purse. "I can't say."

"You can't say? Look - Loki. I know you did *something* to get my teeth fixed. I'd feel better if I knew what it was."

"What does it matter? It's over, right? I'm here."

"It matters because-" Thor's voice is rising, but then he catches himself mid-sentence and continues lowly, almost a whisper, "-Because I hate the thought of them mistreating you."

Loki ignores the fluttering in his stomach. 'I'm *fine*, Thor. Really. It was no big deal."

"So then just tell me! Why are you being so secretive?"

"You're mad that *I'm* keeping secrets from *you*? That's rich. You don't tell me shit about anything."

"You lied to me about going to the labour camp," Thor accuses.

"Yeah, well. You lied to me about Jane being dead, but she's on the Rig."

Thor's eyes go wide. His face is ashen. "Where did you hear that."

Loki can't tell him about the benzos. "You said it when you were.....when you were drunk. It's true isn't it? Jane's on the Rig. You never saw her body."

Thor abruptly grabs Loki and hauls him outside. Loki is too taken aback to put up much of a fight - not that it would matter. There is no use fighting against Thor's boundless strength. It's cold outside and neither of them have jackets. They're not even wearing proper footwear.

"What? You gonna lock me out here, too?"

"Our cabin is bugged," Thor hisses.

"What? Since when?"

"Since always. I can't get rid of 'em without them noticing."

"Who's 'them'? Black? Why are our cabins bugged?"

"I don't know! I don't know, okay? I only just found out. And about Jane." Thor's voice wavers.

"They told me she died from an infection after her miscarriage. I believed them. I was stupid. I didn't think - I didn't think they would do that to me. She's on the Rig cos they found out she had a degree. Cos they overheard us talking about it."

Loki swallows back his mounting horror. He didn't *actually* think it was true.

"Maybe you misheard. Maybe it's just a rumor-"

"I know it. I know it. As soon as I heard it, I knew, deep in my bones, that it was true. Besides, our cabin *is* bugged. They're in the vents - in the kitchen and bedroom. I haven't found others, but that doesn't mean there aren't any more. They're listening."

"Who's listening? Black?"

Thor's voice is hushed. "Black's just the tip of the iceberg. This place....goes way beyond him. Way beyond anything you or I could comprehend."

At once, the root of Thor's mental breakdown is made clear. Loki now understands why Thor's been such a nervous wreck lately. The panic attacks, the sleepless nights. It all makes sense.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to be scared. I didn't want you to think that could happen to you."

"...Could it?"

Thor doesn't say anything for a while. "They prioritize conscripts that are educated. I don't exactly know why. And Jane was.....the most educated person I have ever met. She was into physics and stuff - black holes, singularities, wormholes, alternate universes. I wasn't smart enough to

understand any of it. I used to ask about her thesis just to get her to talk to me.” Thor turns away guiltily. His face twists. “And they overheard us.”

"It wasn't your fault. You couldn't have known-"

"Yeah, it is," Thor says acidly. "I've helped send thousands of Janes to the Rig. *Fuck*. Who am I to even be allowed to grieve for her? After the things I've done? What makes her different from any other conscript I've processed? I only cared about *her* because she was *mine*. And you know what? Nothing here is mine. Jane wasn't. The shack's not - it belonged to the former Red, and it'll go to the Red that'll take my place. I don't even own the years of my life." Thor looks mournful. "She must've been so scared and confused, and in pain. I promised her I would never let that happen to her. What if she thought I betrayed her?" Thor curls away, his hand clutching his chest. "Jane. *Oh God*, Jane."

As Loki pats Thor's back, he can't help but ask: "Is she....alive?"

It seems like Thor won't answer, the way he never answers anything about the Rig. What he says next chills Loki to the bone:

"Not in the way she was before."

Thor gazes back towards their cabin with a deep regretful frown. "They've probably overheard us. They know I know, now."

"What do we do?"

Thor looks afraid.

"I don't know."

Loki is not surprised when Black's men show up at the laundry the following day. Not surprised, yet no less terrified. Loki's first impulse is to make a break for it. He could slip out the back door through the dryer room, but then where would he go? It's not like there's anywhere he could run.

"Feels like I've been seein' a lot of you lately, kiddo," is what Black murmurs when Loki is delivered to his office. "Have a seat, won't you."

Loki does. His hands feel so cold, so clammy. He warms them by sticking them between his thighs as Black pulls his snuff tin out from his desk drawer and takes a hit.

"Sir-"

"Don't speak unless I ask you a question," Black says, sniffing.

Thor is brought in not long thereafter. He stops in the door when he sees Loki already there. His eyes are wide like saucers.

"Red," Black smiles at him. "Close the door please. Have a seat."

Thor shuts the door and stiffly takes the chair next to Loki, leaving the three of them alone. Loki hates to say it, but Thor looks....cowed. Loki's never seen him like that. Thor always stood his ground with Odin, who was a formidable man in the years before his stroke. Loki could never picture Thor being scared of anyone.

"How's the teeth?"

"Much better, sir, thank you sir."

"Must be a huge relief, huh? God, it hurt just to watch you eat! I don't think it detracts too much from your movie star looks. What d'you think, Loki?"

"He looks good," Loki answers quietly.

"Yes he does! Yes he does. I'm sure you figured out your boy here got you that surgery. With help from yours truly, of course. And Boss White - couldn't have done it without the cheddar."

"Yes, thank you," Thor says again quickly. "I'm deeply grateful. And pass my thanks on to Boss White for his generosity."

Black's smile only deepens. "Loki is a very special boy. He cares for you a lot, you know. It's sweet to see, given how difficult that last wife of yours was. I'm glad you two have each other. Who would have thought? Brothers reunited at long last, after over twelve years apart."

Thor's eyebrows pinch. It hadn't occurred to him that Black would know about that. But of course Black knows. Even if Loki hadn't told the whole story to Mrs. White, he and Thor had discussed it in their bugged cabin.

"No wonder you wanted him so bad," Black goes on. "You could've just said your little brother came in. That would've made a lot more sense than that bullshit *change-of-pace* story you fed me."

"He's *not* my brother," Thor says.

Loki ducks his head. He knows why Thor is denying it; moreover, Loki knows that it's technically the truth. But hearing it so vehemently from Thor's lips, when Loki is already so emotionally taxed.... something inside Loki simply snaps. Thor doesn't want him - not as a lover, not even as a little brother. Loki's only with him because Loki begged.

Loki can't help it. He starts to cry, right there and then in Black's office.

"Goddamnit Red, you've gone and hurt his feelings!"

Thor looks genuinely stunned. "Jeez, Loki, I'm sorry-"

Loki shakes his head. He's embarrassed to here, crying in front of Black. Again. He wipes his face with his sleeve.

"He's right, sir, we were never brothers. We're not family. We're not anything. I don't know why I ever thought that. I'm just stupid, I guess."

It goes quiet for what feels like a while. Loki inhales deeply to calm his juddering breathing. It sounds so loud to his own ears. He craves his puffer, but he doesn't want to draw further attention to himself by using it.

"Look," says Black, "I really don't care whether you're brothers or not, whether you're fucking or not. The point is, you don't gotta be keeping secrets from me, Red. *You can talk to me.* About anything. And I do mean anything. I'm here for you. You know that." Black leans forwards and steepled his fingers. "Speaking of which, is there something specific you wanted to ask me about? Something been on your mind lately?"

It's silent again for a long time as the two men stare each other down - Black with resolute intensity, as focused as a laser beam, and Thor with a wide-eyed, bewildered look that screams *caught*. The atmosphere in the office feels thick, humid. Charged, as if electric. The taxidermied owl hovers ominously over Black's shoulder, as if it's about to swoop down upon some hapless vole.

"Yeah," Thor says at last, slowly. "Where's Jane."

His voice is hollow, lost; childlike and tentative and broken and yet strangely hopeful all at once.

"Why, Jane is dead, Red," says Black, eyebrows raised, as if the question surprises him. "She died about six months ago, remember? She didn't pass the full foetus and got an infection."

Thor doesn't say anything. Loki is acutely aware of the wind howling outside.

"You know, her body is still in the morgue," Black says, measured and deliberate. "The incinerator's been on the fritz and there's been something of a backlog. Do you want to see it? I can arrange that for you. Bring your boy for support. I want this matter to be put to rest. I want you both to know that *not everything you hear around here is true.*"

Black picks up his phone and dials it without waiting for either of them to answer. As it rings, he cups his hand over the phone's transmitter.

"Oh, and next time, kindly come to me first when you hear nonsense like that. I do dislike these little games we play." He uncovers the phone's receiver. "Yes, hello, Dr. Woods? This is Lucius Black."

The morgue is located in a series of buildings on the other side of the Compound. It's a harsh, sterile-looking edifice, with no sign on the outside and no windows. Inside is just as chilly and stark. Loki can't explain it, but as soon as he enters, he can *feel* that there are dead people in here.

Loki is nervous. He's seen exactly two dead bodies in his life: Odin's and his mother's. Both their passings were watershed moments, and deeply traumatic. It's funny how much Jane's death has also impacted his life, despite the fact that Loki had never known her. It feels weird to be *meeting* her like this at last.

He and Thor are led into an austere room, dominated by a gurney under a floodlight. Upon the gurney is what looks like a body covered in a sheet.

Thor pauses at the doorway, looking like a spooked child. Loki wonders if his heart is beating as hard as Loki's is. Loki takes his hand, gently tugging him towards the gurney. The mortician pulls back the sheet.

It's worse than Loki could have ever imagined. Jane is *stunning*, even for having been dead and frozen in a morgue for six months. Her pallid white skin and bluish lips do not detract from how mesmerizingly beautiful she is. With her rich, chestnut hair and fine high cheekbones, she looks like a princess from a fairy tale. Not dead, just sleeping, waiting for her prince to kiss her.

That she was *this beautiful* stings worse because of how smart everyone said she was - much smarter than Loki by far, and exponentially more educated. She could not only read, but she could do math. Advanced math, with the weird looking letters in it. She was even a better cook than Loki. Worst of all, Thor loved her, and she didn't even appreciate it.

And yet, seeing her on the gurney, so utterly cold and lifeless, Loki can't find it in his heart to be hateful. Jane didn't deserve to be here, and she didn't deserve to die. Her potential was squandered in this horrible place. At least Loki.....well, he was never going to amount to much anyway. It's not like he'd otherwise be off doing grand things if he weren't here. It's all so hopelessly unfair.

Loki feels like he should say something to her, even just in his head.

I'm sorry that you died.

I'm sorry you ever came here.

I wish Thor loved me like he loved you.

...

Thanks for the coat.

Loki peeks over at Thor, who is standing beside him at Jane's bedside. Loki wasn't sure what Thor was gonna do - whether he would cry or lash out or have a mental breakdown. What Loki doesn't expect is how blank and unresponsive Thor is.

Loki rests his hand on Thor's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Thor doesn't acknowledge this at all. He simply stares ahead at Jane's corpse, not really blinking.

Afterwards, they make their way back out into the Compound yard. Thor's pace is brisk and Loki has to trot to keep up.

"Hey. Wait up."

Thor powers on. Either he can't hear Loki or he's ignoring him.

"Thor. Wait."

Thor stops and turns, squinting against the brightness of the snow.

"Are you okay?" Loki asks.

"That wasn't her," Thor says.

"What?" Loki physically recoils. "What do you mean, *that wasn't her*? Didn't it look like her?"

Thor's eyes drift away and become unfocused. His voice is quiet, thoughtful, and oddly flat: "It looked *exactly* like her."

"So....?"

Thor shakes his head. "I can't put my finger on it. Something was...off."

"Yeah, like maybe the fact that she's been dead in a freezer for six months? Maybe it has something to do with *that*?"

"That wasn't Jane," Thor says stubbornly.

"Then who the fuck was that in the morgue?!" Loki says, loud and shrill. "You think that was a fake? You think Black's tryna trick you or something?"

Thor doesn't say anything.

"You do," Loki says, aghast. "You think that was a fake body. You think Black made a fake body to convince you Jane's dead. Do you know how *crazy* you sound?"

Thor brushes past Loki angrily. He smacks his head with the palm of his hand to forcibly quiet his racing mind. Maybe he *is* going crazy. Maybe that was Jane. It's not like he hasn't been seeing things lately. That *thing* in the ocean keeps moving!

Thor hits his head again, making spots appear before his vision. He needs a drink. He needs a smoke. He needs, fuck. He needs-

"Stop hitting yourself, Jesus!"

Loki's gripping his arm to physically restrain him. There's a genuine look of distress on his face.

"Don't *do* that," he says, upset.

Thor does stop, if only because Loki looks like he's on the verge of crying.

"I'm sorry I called you crazy. You're not crazy. Grief changes the way you see things. I'm not saying you shouldn't mourn Jane. *Mourn her*. I'll mourn with you. But you need to accept the fact that she's *dead*. She's dead and I'm here." Loki's voice cracks. "I'm here," he says again. His eyes are bright and wet. "And I need you."

Thor looks down to where Loki is squeezing Thor's hand. Thor doesn't know at what point Loki had clasped it.

"Please just drop it," Loki pleads. "Please. For me?"

"Okay," Thor says at last, carefully. "For you."

Thor doesn't drop it. He lies awake at night, staring at the ceiling. He knows what he saw. Or at least, he thinks he does. Everything about that body looked like Jane in every possible respect, from the hair, her nose, the fan of her eyelashes. But the pieces didn't add up, like a miscalculation. The sum somehow doesn't add up from its parts.

Moreover, why would they still have her body? After *six months*? Thor doesn't buy it. Even if the incinerator's backlogged - which, Thor admits, it often is - six months seems like a stretch.

Thor needs to make sure. He'll go see her again, this time fully sober. There was a series of freckles on Jane's breast, below her collarbone. Not noticeable - hardly even visible - but Thor knows them intimately, has placed a kiss on every single one. If the Jane in the morgue has those freckles, Thor will know for a fact that it's her. One way or another, it'll put the matter to rest.

"I'd like to see Jane again," Thor says to the mortician's secretary the following morning. "To say one last goodbye. It would help me.....find closure."

"Jane?"

"19343," Thor clarifies.

The secretary frowns as she checks her ledger. "I am sorry, Commander," she says. "It appears that 19343 was sent to the incinerator early this morning."

Fucking Black.

Fucking Black.

Fucking Black.

The Rig is laughing at him.

Thor sometimes catches himself staring out at it, daring it to move. But it never does. Not while Thor is watching. It's tricksey like that.

There's something about it that's calling out to him, taunting him. It knows things. Secrets. Truths Thor can't bring himself to face. A part of Thor wants to hear what it has to say; maybe that would explain everything.

More and more, Thor simply comes-to, not knowing where he is or what he'd been doing. Entire hours are lost like this; even days, as if time itself is being sucked into a black hole.

Something is very, very wrong with him, and it's getting worse. He's started coughing up Tar. That's always the first sign. Frankly, Thor is surprised it took this long.

Thor doesn't want Loki to know. He can't burden Loki with this. Loki would only fret.

It's kind of ironic. After Loki had just done *God-knows-what* to get his teeth fixed! A wasted effort on a waste of a human being. He might as well have let his teeth rot out of his head.

Thor has to make arrangements for him, and soon. He has to find someone who'll take Loki in, someone who'll treat him nice. If Thor could just accomplish that one thing before he's too far gone, then...he'd allow it to happen.

At this point, it's the best he can hope for.

That night, Loki doesn't come home.

Thor waits and waits, first with annoyance at the lack of a prompt hot supper. Then, as the hours tick by, Thor's irritation ebbs. He starts to get really worried.

When he can stand it no longer, Thor grabs the wall phone and dials a familiar number. The phone rings five times before it's answered.

Mrs. Beaton tells him Loki had not shown up for work at the laundry that morning.

Thor slams the phone receiver down and tries to calm himself. There are lots of places Loki might be. He throws his coat on and hurries back outside, towards one of the cabins at the opposite end of the little village. He bangs on the door. Green's wife answers; she looks surprised to see him at this

hour.

"Commander....?"

"Hey. Uh, Sigryn." Thor peeks behind her. "Is Loki here?"

Her eyes widen. "No, sir, he ain't."

"Do you have any idea where he might be?"

"We're just friends, sir, nothing more-"

"Yes, I know," Thor says impatiently. "That's why I'm asking you. Have you seen him?"

'He's not at the laundry?"

Thor shakes his head. "Mrs. Beaton says he didn't show up this morning."

"*Oh,*" Sigryn says, hushed, in a manner that hardly sounds reassuring. She chews her lip. "Um, you could try the brothel, sir....."

Thor is too riled up to question why Loki would be there. He mutters a half-hearted thanks over his shoulder and takes off in that direction.

"Commander Red," The woman at the front desk greets. Thor vaguely remembers her from when he used to come here. She's an older woman with a mass of thick, curly grey-streaked hair.

"Is Loki here?"

"Loki?"

"Shoulder-length black hair, green eyes-"

"Yes, I know him," she says, and Thor starts to hope until she continues: "He's not been around here for a week."

Thor feels the bottom of his stomach drop. The suspicion he'd been actively trying to suppress finally froths up into consciousness:

It's happened. Again.

"Is there anything we might be able to help you with, Commander....?"

Thor doesn't even respond; he's already turned on his heels. He careens across the Compound into Central Block West and barrels past the men with the black patches on their lapels. Black's soldiers let him pass in bewilderment, probably hesitant to apprehend a Commander, even a rampaging one. This is how Thor manages to barge into Black's office.

"Where's Loki?!"

Black looks up, visibly startled, from where he'd been pouring over some papers. His lips purse unhappily.

"Black," Thor's voice is strangled. "Where's Loki."

Black sighs. "Sit down, Red. We should talk."

Thor grips the edge of Black's desk. "What did you do to him?! Where did you take him?"

"I'm sorry, Red," Black says, genuinely apologetic. "You will be refunded your owed years."

Black's men are behind him - they'd followed Thor in. But Thor is barely cognisant of anyone or

anything except for one fact.

"You took him from me! You took him from me! Where is he?"

"Red," Black says. "Sit down."

"Is it because I wouldn't stop asking questions about Jane? Loki had nothing to do with that! It was *me*, Black! It was *me*!"

"Red," Blacks says again. "Sit. Down."

"I gave you everything," Thor is actively crying now. "I never questioned you. I never went against orders. I played by your rules. I did exactly what you told me to. I *trusted* you!"

"Calm down there, Red," Black says warily, his hands outstretched like he's approaching a wild animal. "You need to cool off."

The men from behind finally seize him, and Thor starts to struggle.

"*No!*"

Thor feels a prick of a needle in his neck. His vision blurs around the edges, and everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Yes I saw The Love Witch and you should too!

Hope you enjoyed xoxo

five of nine

Chapter Notes

The Christmas episode lol.

TW: child abuse and sexual assault, but it won't be in a scene; it will be a character recalling their prior abuse/assault.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Mrs. White is wearing a form-fitting dress. Blood red, to match her lips.

"Mooncalf has stopped eating in your absence," she tells Loki. "It appears he grew quite fond of you in your brief time together. He has been.....quite distressed since you left."

Loki shifts on his feet, as much as the guards behind him will allow. His handcuffs are starting to chafe.

"Regrettably, the last sample you collected was not viable," White goes on. "His sperm count was much lower than expected. Your new assignment is to facilitate the experiment, which you will do indefinitely."

Indefinitely. Loki has to think. Does that mean....forever?

"I belong to Commander Red," Loki tries weakly.

"Wouldn't you rather be with someone who actually loves you?" Mrs White mocks, her voice pitched high like a little girl. Then her face devolves back into ennui. "Get the samples. You did it before and you'll do it again."

"I'm not saying I won't, ma'am, but -" Loki swallows. "Will I be able to go back to the Compound after?"

She scrutinizes him for a moment. Her eyes are so dark, like black holes that suck in all surrounding light. "I am unsure where you've gleaned this idea that you can negotiate with me,"

she says, slowly. "Your little story might've amused me last time, but my patience has its limits, and it's quickly wearing thin."

"Ma'am, it's just - my brother-"

Mrs. White's eyes flash. "One more word out of you and I'll have every last remaining tooth pulled from your beloved brother's head."

Loki's mouth snaps shut at once.

"I need you to understand something," Mrs. White goes on, deceptively soft. "You are mine to do with as I please. If I had shot you dead last time, what do you think would've happened?"

Loki is too afraid to say anything, but regardless Mrs. White answers for him:

"Nothing," She whispers with relish. "Nothing. They would've scrubbed your brains off the wall, hauled your corpse out of here, and that would've been the end of it. That's how disposable you are."

She backs up, as if to allow the impact of her words to sink in.

"Get the samples," she says. "Or else."

"Don't touch me," Loki snaps as Dr. Duntsch herds him into the exam room. "I *said*, don't fucking touch me!"

"I have to swab you. Hold still."

"I want to call Red first. Let me call him."

Duntsch huffs, as if Loki is being a difficult toddler. “What would that accomplish.”

“I didn’t get to tell him goodbye. I just want him to know I’m okay. Please. Let me call him. It’ll only be for a minute.”

Duntch's lips purse, so when he sighs in capitulation, it's through his nose. “What’s his cabin number.”

“Twenty six. We’re cabin twenty six.”

Loki makes careful note of the buttons Duntsch presses on the wall phone: 0 - 1 - 1 - something - something - 2 - 6. His hand was blocking Loki’s line of sight.

Duntsch passes him the receiver, but keeps one finger perched on the hook switch. “I’m going to stand right here the whole time. I’ll hang up if you try anything.”

Loki rolls his eyes as he holds the phone to his ear. He’s not interested in tattling on Duntsch’s little science project. He just needs to hear Thor’s voice.

The phone rings and rings. And rings. Loki shifts his weight back and forth.

Pick up, damn you.

He stands there for three of the longest minutes of his life. His heart sinks with each passing *brrrp* of the dial tone, yet he can’t bring himself to hang up - as if Thor might pick up on the fiftieth ring after having not heard the first forty-nine.

Duntsch moves to grab at the receiver. “Okay, are you ready-”

“Was that really his number!?” Loki wrenches himself away and cradles the phone protectively against his cheek. “Cabin twenty-six in the Compound. Twenty-six.”

“Yes, it was,” Duntsch says tiredly. “He wasn’t home, Loki.”

"I want to try again later. Tonight."

"I don't think that will be possible."

Loki grits his teeth so hard they hurt. "Why not."

Duntsch lowers his voice to a harried whisper. "I shouldn't've let you do that just now. Do you know how much trouble I could get into?"

Loki doesn't care about that. All that matters is one simple, undeniable fact:

"I *belong* to Commander Red."

"You might not have *your* Red down there if you go back."

Loki physically recoils. "What's that supposed to mean."

"It means maybe you should forget about him." Duntsch says, not unkindly, as he pries the phone receiver out of Loki's hand and hangs it back up on the wall. "Maybe it's time you moved on."

Loki crosses his arms in front of his chest. "That's not going to happen."

"If you don't cooperate I can't protect you from White," Duntsch says.

Loki is cowed enough by this to allow Duntsch to collect his swab. But Duntsch is wrong. Loki will *never* forget about Thor. Not now, not ever.

Moo is delighted to see him. He makes happy coo-like gurgles as soon as Loki is brought in, and immediately sets about caressing Loki's hair as if to make sure that yes, Loki is indeed back. Loki stands there and allows it, but he makes no encouragement in word or in deed, and he keeps his arms crossed obtrusively in front of his chest the whole time. Loki's sullen attitude doesn't appear

to register with Moo at all. Seems like Moo really did miss him. On any other day Loki might've been moved by that; today, however, he just can't care.

After the dust of their reunion settles, it's back on the couch for more of Moo's favourite pastime. Loki is more distracted than ever - not that he could be bothered to pay attention to Moo's movies at the best of times. He can't imagine how sick Thor must be right now. Thor must think Loki had been taken to the Rig, just as Jane supposedly was. Echoing in Loki's mind is Thor's confession - about how he'd planned on shooting himself in the wake of Jane's loss. And that was *before* that whole freaky business with Jane's fake-corpse, before Thor had completely descended into paranoia. This could very well be Thor's tipping point, and it makes Loki terribly anxious. He feels nauseous, jittery, with too much energy and nowhere to put it. He needs to find a way to reach Thor. He needs out of this fucking basement. He needs fresh air.

He can't even fake a smile, or even pretend he wants to be here for Moo's sake. He hates this place and doesn't care who knows it.

If they want their sample, Loki is going to be setting terms.

"You're not making any attempts at sample extraction," Duntsch says quietly, some two days later, as Moo snores from his armchair. "It's beginning to cause some concern....."

Loki doesn't move from where he's curled up on the couch, his forehead cradled in front of him on his knees. "Go to hell."

Duntsch sighs. "Loki -"

"I want to go back to the Compound," Loki says as he looks up. "Let me go back to the Compound after. I'll get you a fucking gallon's worth of samples. Please. Just let me go back."

"I don't have the authority to promise you that," Duntsch tells him. "Besides, it would not be prudent to release you back into the general population."

"Because you're afraid I'll talk? I didn't say shit about this place! Ask Black!"

"Your release would compromise the experiment's integrity."

Loki feels hysterical. "I don't know what you're talking about! I don't know why I'm here or what any of this is for! What am I gonna say? Why would anyone believe me? Please."

Duntsch reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small piece of paper. The entire page is coated in pencil lead, revealing an outline of a drawing in white. It's a rubbing of Moo's Rig drawing, created from the indentations his pen had made in the paper below.

"I could've shown White this," he says. "And that would've been the end of you."

Loki stares at it blearily, then tucks his head back into his knees. He just can't fucking win.

"I love to cook." Dr. Duntsch says, apropos of nothing. "I'm very good, a gourmande some might say. I have a house on the property, not far from here. It's nice. Much nicer than the Compound. I, uh. Think you'd like it."

Loki peers up at him again with narrowed eyes. "Are you....propositioning me?"

"You'll need somewhere to go after the experiment has concluded. I don't want them to dispose of you."

"*Dispose of me,*" Loki echoes, horrified.

"Please just consider it," Dr. Duntsch says. "Please."

Evidently, Duntsch thinks Loki needs more convincing. When he comes and tells Loki to go with him, Loki does so without much thought, if only to get out of Moo's rooms for a goddamn minute. He should have found it strange that Duntsch wasn't wearing his lab coat. He should also have found it strange that there were no orderlies trailing after them.

Duntsch leads Loki down a long underground causeway that appears to branch out from the Big House proper, since the featureless hallway goes on for what feels like an exorbitantly long time. Duntsch beetles forwards with so much speed that Loki has to trot to keep pace. He doesn't say anything aside from *this way, this way*, and only glances backwards to make sure Loki is still following. There's a strange energy about him, but not so much that it sets off alarm bells. Nothing about Duntsch is threatening. And anyway, Loki is glad just for the opportunity to stretch his legs.

At the end of the causeway is another elevator, which the two of them board. There's only two buttons, and Duntsch presses what must be the up button. As the elevator rumbles upwards, he smiles at Loki awkwardly, adjusts his glasses and wheezes, closed lipped, like he's trying to mask how out of breath he is from their speed-walk.

At last, the elevator doors open onto....Duntsch's house?

A yippy little white dog is at the entryway at once. It circles Duntsch's ankles excitedly, barks, then sniffs at Loki's feet.

"That's Laika. She's friendly. Aren't you, bubba." Duntsch curls over to pet the dog's head, and the dog rears up to lick at his fingers. Duntsch straightens and says, "Please, come in."

Loki peers around. The entire house is outfitted for Christmas, complete with a twinkling Christmas tree, a garland of greenery on the mantle, and a roaring fireplace. Jazzy big band music is playing from a record player. And the smell - the smell hits Loki like a punch to the face: cinnamon and clove and nutmeg, with subtle notes of pine from the Christmas tree. It's so different from both the Compound and the lab that it's disorientating - like stepping into a holiday magazine.

"Can I get you a glass of wine?" Duntsch calls from the kitchen, startling Loki out of his reverie.

"Uh, sure."

"Red or white?"

"Red," Loki answers.

“I knew I liked you for a reason,” Duntsch says, and forces an awkward smile. “I have a cab, a pinot noir, a zinfandel....”

“Cab is fine,” says Loki.

Duntsch uncorks the bottle and pours him a glass with a long, delicate, elegant stem, twisting the bottle at the end of the pour so as not to spill a single drop. He hands the glass to Loki and Loki takes it.

“You’re not going to roofie me, are you,” Loki says flatly.

“And sully that beautiful cab? Heavens, no. Just so you know, you picked the most expensive wine of the three.”

Loki takes a sip. It’s good - full-bodied and not too dry.

“I hope you’re hungry. I’ve got some gorgeous ribeyes. Gonna sear them up alongside some fresh herbs, with creamy mash and roast asparagus on the side. Sit down, please. Make yourself comfortable.”

And so, Loki pads into the large open-concept kitchen area, stiffly takes a seat at the table, and sets his wine glass down in front of him. The table is set perfectly, complete with Christmas wreath, candles, and mounds of tantalizing finger-foods. Loki doesn’t feel allowed to touch any of it.

“I’m just going to get these going. Won’t take too long. Help yourself to some nibbles.” Duntsch gestures to the board on the table laden with fancy crackers, olives, cheeses, cured meats and nuts: stuff Loki would *never* get in the Compound. “Laika’s going to try and be your friend if you’ve got cheese.”

Loki slices off a creamy dollop of soft cheese and slathers it on a cracker, and indeed, Laika is at his feet at once. She stares up at him and wags her tail as soon as Loki makes eye contact - obviously expecting him to give her some. Sucks for the dog because Loki’s not about to share. She probably gets to eat more cheese on a day-to-day basis than Loki does.

Loki pops the cracker in his mouth. “You really went all out for this, huh.”

"Well, it *is* Christmas eve," Duntsch answers as he lays the steaks down on a sizzling cast-iron griddle.

Loki is so taken aback he pauses mid-chew. He thought it was still sometime in December.

"Oh."

Duntsch smiles at him, somewhat pityingly. "It's easy to lose track of days. Time is meaningless down in the lab. How do you take your steak?"

"Medium, I guess."

"Medium- *rare*?"

Loki shrugs.

"Pity to cook a gorgeous piece of meat like this past medium. I despise it when people char their steaks to bricks. I'll teach you to take it rare, yet." He says this with a wink. There's an air of excitement, even giddiness about him, like he's been looking forward to this for some time. He certainly put the effort into entertaining. It's weird to witness him in this capacity, as an anxious, eager-to-please host. Loki's never even seen him without his lab coat, let alone this ridiculous tacky Christmas-themed apron he's got on.

After searing the meat on his griddle for a few minutes, Duntsch presents Loki with the most tantalizing plate of food he's had since he came here: steak with a mouthwatering salty crust and a lob of butter melting on top, a mound of pepper-flecked mashed potatoes, and glistening roasted asparagus.

"Thanks," Loki says through the saliva pooling in his mouth.

Duntsch sets his own plate of food down in front of him and sits. He takes his napkin and drapes it across his lap with a flourish. Loki does the same, albeit in a more perfunctory manner.

“Well, tuck in,” Duntsch says. He cuts into his own steak, takes one bite and moans, “Mm. Divine, if I do say so myself. The marbling is exquisite.”

Loki doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of agreeing, but it's unquestionably the best steak he's ever had: salty and beefy and buttery and just so....decadent. Loki sometimes forgets that food like this exists in the world.

“So. Where're you from.”

Loki looks at him. Duntsch is really trying to make this into a date - a date with the sex worker he's helping keep prisoner in an underground lab.

“██████████.”

“Oh! I hear the summer there is nice. Would love to see the pier one day. You could show me the sights.”

“I was deported,” Loki tells him through a mouthful of steak. “Can't go back.”

“Ah. Yes, come to think of it, I did see that in your file. How unfortunate. Well, no matter. There's ways around that. How's the doneness of the steak?”

“It's good.”

Duntsch beams. “I told you it would be better on the rarer side. And the mash?”

“It's all good,” Loki answers.

“I love to cook,” Duntsch tells him again. “I might've been a chef, in another life. Another universe, maybe,” he smiles slyly. “The science behind it is *fascinating* to me. But what it comes down to is good quality ingredients and good technique. Sometimes simple is best, you know? Let the ingredients speak for themselves. That's the essence of French cuisine. Not a lot of bells and whistles, but I dare you to try and make a traditional French omelette with a perfect golden curd! Ha-ha!”

A long silence follows where Loki just eats, pausing only to gulp down Duntsch's hoity-toity wine. Loki supposes Duntsch is waiting for him to pick up the conversation. Loki could not be assed to do that.

Duntsch's beady little eyes gleam in the candlelight. "I like the way you hold your utensils. It's cute."

Loki pauses with a fork mid-way to his mouth.

"It is!" Duntsch insists. "It's.....rustic."

Loki emphatically pops the hunk of steak in his mouth and chews it.

"Usually I eat with my hands out of the back of a dumpster. Like a raccoon."

Duntsch laughs, but there's a note of discomfort to it, like he can't tell if Loki is joking or not.

"Well, you know. There's a time and a place for eating with one's hands. I do very good ribs. Fall off the bone, melt in your mouth ribs. And of course there's pizza. I have an authentic Italian brick pizza oven out back. Get that bad boy all fired up in the summer. What's your favourite pizza topping?"

"Hawaiian, I guess."

"With the canned pineapple? Oh, Loki. You *must* try a classic margherita. Nice and clean, just tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella and basil. Can't be beat." He pauses. "But I admit, there's some appeal to a bit of sweet, tangy pineapple on a pizza. You could char the pineapple first, replace the ham with a nice mortadella. That would actually be quite delightful."

"What else was in my file."

"Oh," Duntsch dabs primly at his lips with his napkin, "Nothing terribly interesting. I needed to

approve you before you could be considered for the experiment, that's all."

"So you know everything about me already."

"Not *everything*, no." Duntsch smiles weakly. "Not as much as I'd like. Not your favourite pizza topping."

"Did it say *why* I got deported?"

"It mentioned it."

"Aren't you afraid I'm going to steal from you," Loki says casually as he cuts into his steak. He smiles, twisted. "I'm a bit of a thief, you know."

"What do you want? Take it."

Loki snorts, but Duntsch isn't joking.

"I mean it. What do you want? Take it. It's yours. Anything I have."

Loki stares at him for a minute, considering. He runs his tongue over his teeth, chasing that last bit of beefy flavour.

"I want more of that wine."

Duntch reaches to top up Loki's glass.

"You think all this'll get you laid?" Loki asks dryly.

"No, not necessarily. But you haven't had dessert yet," Duntsch says, finishing his pour and setting the wine bottle down. "Look. I get that you're understandably a little suspicious of this. And of me."

But I must ask: is this so bad, Loki? I know this is nicer than whatever you've gotten used to down in the Compound. Let me take care of you. You'd have it so easy here. I don't even need you to cook. Just keep house."

"...And sleep with you."

Duntsch flushes pink. "Yes, and that. But we won't be stuck here forever; a few more years at most. Once I complete the terms of my contract, we'll be free to travel. See the sights. Go somewhere warm. I can get you the necessary documents to enter any city-state you like. Even [REDACTED]. Or Hawaii! Waikiki beach, like your shirt. Would you like that?"

"I belong to Commander Red," Loki says firmly.

A look of frustration crosses Duntsch's face. "Commander Red will be compensated for your loss."

"*Compensated*," Loki repeats.

"I know you think you owe him your loyalty, but let me ask you this: is he different than you thought he'd be? Does he sometimes do things that are...odd? Upsetting?" Duntsch pauses for effect. He knows, as Loki does, that the answer to that is *yes*. "That person who saved you when you were a child - he's gone. He doesn't remember. He's not coming back. He's only going to slip further away from you. And then what? What would you have to show for your slavish devotion? You'll be left alone in that wretched place, scraping by off measly rations and freezing in the winter. What future do you have there? Working in the brothel, if you're lucky, until those men tear you apart. If Red truly cared for you, wouldn't he want you to have a nice life? Wouldn't he want you to escape the Compound?"

Loki frowns, looking away. Thor probably would.

"I'm offering you something better. Something more." Duntsch pauses. "Loki, I love you."

Loki's head recoils, half in surprise. "*You don't know me.*"

"I'd like to."

Duntsch leans forwards and kisses Loki - just a quick press on the lips, really. Loki does not rebuff the kiss, but he does not reciprocate, either. When Duntsch pulls away he smiles at Loki, tepid yet hopeful.

“Now. I hope you saved room for dessert.”

Another bottle of wine later and they’ve somehow wound up on the couch in front of Duntsch’s fireplace. Duntsch is glossy-eyed from the alcohol. Loki is buzzed too, but he’s not going to let himself get wasted. Not after what happened with Black. Still, it feels good to gulp down Duntsch’s expensive wine as if it were two dollars a bottle.

Duntsch passes him an elegantly-wrapped Christmas present tied with ribbon.

"Have you been naughty or nice this year?" He asks. At Loki’s unimpressed face he appends, “I’m just teasing! Here. Open it.”

It’s a box of chocolates - the kind with all sorts of different flavours and fillings and a little guide to tell you which is which. Loki audibly gasps at the look of them, the intoxicating smell of them. These aren’t at all like Black’s little tinfoil-wrapped chocolates. These are *works of art*.

“Where did you get these?”

“I have my ways,” Duntsch says with an eyebrow waggle, smugly pleased Loki’s genuinely shocked reaction. “I can get you all the chocolates you want!” He takes the little infographic sheet in hand. “What kinds of flavours do you like? Milk chocolate? Coconut...?”

Loki starts to snarf them down with wild, indiscriminate abandon. He’s full from dinner but he doesn’t care. He’s gone hungry too many times, and he doesn’t know when he’ll have this opportunity again. *Chocolate*. It’s wonderful.

Duntsch’s smile wanes as Loki decimates the chocolates. "Oh - okay. Maybe not *all* the chocolates you want. I will require that you stay trim of course, you have such a pleasing figure....”

There's no point in denying the transactional nature of Duntsch's offer. Always ask what the expectations are upfront.

"What else do you *require*," Loki says with a mouthful of chewy caramel.

Duntsch tilts his head up, assuming an air of authority he doesn't quite wield naturally. "I want you to greet me when I come home. I expect your willingness. And a cheerful disposition."

The boyfriend experience. Men say they want it, but it's not like they'd ever hold Loki's hand in public. As if Loki and this crusty fifty-something year old man could ever pass as genuine boyfriends, anyway.

"If a dog's what you want, you've got one already."

"That's enough." Duntsch snatches the chocolate box away from Loki's lap. "Fine. I'll be explicit. You will provide me with sex. Oral sex, whenever I demand. Anal sex, at least a few times a week. I expect you to be submissive and obedient. I will not tolerate this bratty little attitude you're giving me."

Loki regards him dully. "Anything else?"

Duntsch wavers. His face turns beet red. "Well, I do have certain proclivities. Preferences...."

"Such as...?"

Duntsch is really squirming now. "It's kind of silly, maybe...."

There is very little he could say that could shock Loki. If Loki is lucky, maybe it's something masochistic like CBT.

"I'm very open-minded," is what Loki says.

Duntsch reaches under the tree and passes Loki another present, somewhat sheepishly. "Here. This

might explain...”

Loki rips off the wrapping paper and opens the box beneath. He holds up the garment inside by the spaghetti straps. It's a negligee of some kind. An emerald green wispy babydoll nightie. A surge of hatred froths up from deep within Loki - a hatred so deep and all-consuming that he considers snatching a steak knife from the kitchen and sinking it into this guy's guts.

“I thought you might like the colour. Hard to find that kinda stuff in green. Usually it's in pink or black or white. Ah-ha. It's kinda Christmassy though...”

Loki looks Duntsch dead in the eye. “Want me to put this on?”

Duntsch's paunchy face lights up like he's hit the jackpot, like he can't believe what he's hearing.

“Yeah! I mean - yeah.”

Loki gets up and goes to the bathroom, negligee in hand. *Green*. His favourite colour. He huffs out a caustic little laugh:

Black, you absolute fucker.

Loki carefully strips off his own clothing, pausing to take a few puffs on his inhaler. The dog dander is starting to get to him. He could not feel less sexy right now, stuffed as he is from dinner and somewhat wheezy from asthma. And anyway, there's nothing about this that turns Loki's crank.

"Ho Ho Ho," Loki says as he emerges from the bathroom.

Duntsch is *gobsmacked*. There's a part of Loki who relishes it, who likes being admired for his looks. If nothing else, Loki likes being able to eat. That's all Duntsch's awe is to Loki: a meal ticket.

"Do you like it?" Loki asks, kittenish, his voice pitched high, although he can't quite mask the sarcasm in his tone. Duntsch does not pick up on it at all - not like Sunny would've.

“Yeah,” Duntsch dabs at his glistening forehead with his handkerchief. “I like your tattoo. Now you're the present, all wrapped up.”

Loki sits back down on the couch next to him. Duntsch cannot contain his grin. He looks so, so sweaty - he's nervous. Or excited. Or maybe it's all that steak he ate.

“So,” he says. “What d’you think.”

“What do I think.”

“About the - the gift. Do you like it?”

Loki carefully keeps his eyes from rolling into the back of his head. He much preferred the chocolates.

“Oh, yeah.” Loki purrs. “It's right up my alley.”

“Good - good. I thought so. It suits you. I like that you're comfortable with your feminine side.” His blush intensifies, as does the amount of sweat accruing on his forehead. “It's very sensual.”

Loki is beginning to get the gist of this guy's kink. Amazing how quickly men get over their embarrassment once given a shred of encouragement.

“You like 'em girly, do you.”

“I like everything about women except the women parts,” Duntsch says with a little rueful smile. “As you can imagine, it's hard to meet someone in this line of work, especially given my, uh. Particular interests. I used to want to find someone to marry, but now, as I get older, I think this kind of arrangement would be more suitable for a man like me. No muss, no fuss. No drama.”

Of course he'd find this arrangement *suitable*. It's easy to like a relationship where you can call all the shots; where the other person has to cater to your every whim, where there is no real

compromise.

Duntsch continues: "I'm about to come into a great deal of wealth, Loki. A great deal indeed. I fear that if I were to pursue a more conventional relationship, I would be made a target for gold diggers. I've accepted that in order to get what I want, I will have to pay for it. So I might as well set it up on my own terms. If you please me, I will be generous. Whatever I give you, you can keep. Clothes, jewelry. I'll make sure you're well taken care of. The best of everything."

"That's what you want, huh? Someone to spoil?"

Duntsch is getting visibly flustered now.

"It gets lonely here," he admits. "Just me and Laika. I'm tired of cooking for one. I'm tired of sleeping alone."

He seems so pathetic. So utterly whiney and pathetic. Poor baby, all alone in his nice warm house with his nice expensive wine and his fucking pizza oven. He doesn't know the first thing about what it really means to be truly alone in the world.

"Sounds terrible," Loki says.

Duntsch nods solemnly. "That's why when I saw you, I knew I had to get you out of there. I had to have you. I couldn't bear to let White dispose of you. You're just so beautiful. God. You're even more beautiful in person."

Loki blinks. *In person?*

"You're being wasted in the Compound. On some filthy toothless Rig Pig. He doesn't appreciate you. He doesn't deserve you. You can have a nice life here. I know I'm not a handsome man, but I'm not unkind. I promise to treat you well. I can get you prescription pills. Would you like that?"

Despite everything - despite this whole situation, the fucking crazy business with Moo and Mrs. White, Loki's inner sex worker pleads for him to say yes. The drive to secure a daddy, to be kept, is so strong it's overwhelming. The Loki of a year ago would have said yes so fast it would've been supersonic. To only have one man to please would've been a dream come true. He's ashamed at how badly he wants to give in. He's so tired of struggling, so tired of being cold and hungry and

exhausted and afraid.

“All I need is a few more samples,” Duntsch goes on. “Please Loki. I know you can do it. You have to try.”

“Is his jizz magic or something?”

“Who, Mooncalf?” Duntsch’s eyebrows raise, and he chuckles. “Might as well be! He is a *fascinating* specimen. The culmination of my life’s work, in fact....”

He seems proud - even boastful. Loki knows what it means when a man gets like that. It means he wants to talk.

Loki shuffles closer, curls towards Duntsch and reclines alluringly with one elbow perched on the back of the couch and his hand in his hair, propping up his head.

“Sounds like you’ve been working on this for awhile.”

The effect on Duntsch is immediate. “Oh yes! Many years. Many, many years, indeed. But we’ve never been this close to a breakthrough.”

“With the spunk,” Loki finishes.

Duntsch giggles. “Yes. The spunk.”

“Are you turkey basting someone with it?”

Duntsch blinks at him until he gets what Loki’s implying. Then he starts to laugh.

“Heavens no! If only it were that simple!”

“What else is spunk for?”

Duntsch's eyes darken. "Oh, I could think of a few things. Speaking of, I've been meaning to ask: do you use protection with your soldier? You always come back clean. I prefer not to, you understand." He is clearly titillated by the mere illicit thought of it. His voice drops to an excited whisper: "I like knowing a part of me is left inside you."

Loki fights the urge to wrinkle his nose. He isn't about to let this fucker derail the conversation so easy. He carefully refills Duntsch's wine glass and smiles.

“Something tells me you ain't getting freaky with Moo's spunk,” he teases. “So if it ain't that, and it ain't turkey basting, what are you doing with it?”

Duntsch grins coyly into his wine glass. “I shouldn't say. It's highly classified...”

“You can't talk about your work with your girl?” Loki tilts his head, a pout on his lips, all while carefully analyzing Duntsch's ensuing reaction. Loki's done this enough to know how to tease out what's *really* gonna get a john off, and he gets the sense that he's drawing ever nearer to the mark. “Daddy?”

Bingo.

“It's his DNA. His very particular DNA. Replete with the fullness of humanity, if you can believe it,” Duntsch says, quiet but giddy, like he can hardly contain himself. “I know he doesn't look it, but he is nearly perfect, nearly complete. Granted, a few too many chromosomes, but we're slowly paring them down by half until we're back to the standard forty-six. After that - one more iteration. The final iteration, and the process will be complete.”

“I'm kinda stupid,” Loki says. “I don't really understand.”

“Yes, I know. My sweet stupid girl. That's okay. You don't have to understand. It's very simple. Have you ever wanted to undo a choice you'd made? Change the course of time? If your mortal body could withstand the ravages of altered space-time.....and rewrite it to suit your will....well, that would make you a God, wouldn't it?" A flash of primal greed crosses his face. His eyes gleam, bulging out, almost crazed. “You'll want to be riding on those coat-tails, Loki. Loyalty will be rewarded. This will be a new era for civilization. For humanity. Some may call what we're doing *unnatural*. But isn't that what they said about the steam engine? The airplane? Humans have

always been discovering ways to master the world around them. Ever since the dawn of time. First we harnessed the power of fire. Then we crafted arrows and mined ore. Then we made gunpowder, and the hydrogen bomb. This is just the next step - the greatest leap forwards yet. Unfortunate that there have been so many casualties in the process, but that too is just a part of the natural order. Great things cannot be achieved without sacrifice, as it was with the original Laika. That's what it means to be on the cutting edge. It will all be worth it, in the end. I will be first amongst the world's new elite. Recognized as the one who made it all happen....."

He refocuses his attention back on Loki. It's as though he'd briefly forgotten Loki was even there.

"What if I told you I could get your mother for you?"

Loki recoils, stunned - firstly that Duntch would know about that, and secondly that he would say something so *profoundly outlandish*.

"My mom is *dead*."

"Yes. In this timeline. But there are many timelines. Many universes. I can think of no better reward for your facilitation of the experiment. I would advocate on your behalf, I believe I could have it done...."

Loki sits up. His voice breaks, as does his carefully crafted facade. "You're lying. You're lying."

Duntch takes his hand. "Don't be upset, my sweet princess. I'm just trying to open your eyes to the possibilities. She died before her time, correct? Thirty-seven is so very young. I'm sure she would've had many more years in her, if only someone had intervened at the proper moment, given her the treatment she needed...."

Loki feels his eyes watering. He shakes his head. "I don't believe you."

"I don't need you to believe me. Not right now. But you will see, in the end. Don't cry, my love. Let me get mummy for you. Would that make you happy?"

It seems utterly unbelievable, *unfathomable*..... but at the same time, so does everything that's happened to him thus far. What does Loki know about science, about what these people are capable of? And frankly, Loki *wants* to believe it. What wouldn't he give to be held by his mother

again? To hear her voice, to smell her hair? The ache for her has not abated whatsoever in the six years since her death; nor has the pain of knowing he'd inadvertently contributed to her downward spiral, which began after he got a daddy of his own. The guilt of living off her own son's prostitution was too much for her to bear - as if their circumstances were somehow *her* fault, the result of her failure as a mother. She'd turned to harder drugs to cope. And then, one day, her heart simply stopped beating.

Her loss was the single worst thing that has ever happened to him, and that's saying something. The grief is like a thorn in his brain. Loki might be able to ignore it for a while, numb himself with whatever drugs or alcohol he can get his hands on, but it never really goes away.

In a small voice, Loki says, "You could do that?"

"Yes," Duntsch breathes, resting his hand on the back of Loki's neck. "Yes, my love. If that's what you want, that's what you'll get. Hmm? You want your mummy back? You want your mummy and a daddy to take care of you?"

"Yeah," Loki whimpers.

Duntsch pulls Loki in and kisses him again. This time, Loki is too shaken and raw and frankly, freaked out to do anything but allow it. He allows Duntsch to coax his mouth open; he allows him to deepen their kiss. Loki even catches himself half-heartedly kissing Duntsch back, and he hates himself for it.

When Duntsch breaks their kiss, his face is utterly pleased.

"I knew you'd listen to reason," he beams. "But there is one more small matter I must address: I don't ever want to hear a word about Red again. He is not your future. I am. Do you hear me?" His grip on Loki's neck tightens for emphasis. "You have no future without me."

Duntsch tugs downward on Loki's neck and Loki just...goes. Call it a lifetime's worth of habit, of being trained to never say no. Loki doesn't even recognize that he's the one undoing Duntsch's fly and pulling his hard dick out. He doesn't feel anything at all when he puts it in his mouth. He simply.....goes away, retreating back into that safe little box inside his own mind where nothing and no one can touch him.

Distantly, he thinks he hears Duntsch's voice: *Good girl, good girl*. It hardly registers. Loki feels

nothing at all aside from an inexplicable impulse to see this through to the end, which at least comes mercifully quick. Duntsch's semen floods his mouth and Loki dutifully swallows it without any thought whatsoever. He doesn't even care enough to put up a fight about whether or not to spit it out.

“That was wonderful,” Duntsch murmurs with a lopsided grin as Loki sits back up. His eyes are hooded as he reaches out to stroke a tendril of Loki’s hair. “Better than I thought you’d be.”

Duntsch's hand drops from Loki's hair and he sighs in contentment and satisfaction. His head lolls back and his doughy body sinks deeper into the couch. His eyes close. His breathing becomes slow and even.

"Such a sweet, rosy girl you are. I can't wait to make love to you...."

As soon as Loki's sure he's asleep, Loki carefully disentangles himself from Duntsch's splayed limbs and hastily tiptoes back towards the kitchen, mindful of his footfalls. He grabs the phone off the wall and punches in the digits he'd watched Duntsch dial a few days before: 0 - 1 - 1 - *something* - *something* - 2 - 6. Loki has to guess the missing numbers.

“Come on,” Loki huffs into the receiver. “Come on.”

A curt yet pleasant female voice chirps: *The number you have called - is not in service. Please check your number and try your call again.*

Loki presses down on the phone's hook switch. He tries dialling again, using a different random combination of missing numbers.

The number you have called - is not in serv-

And again:

The number you have called -

The number you have -

The number - .

The number -

The -

Loki slams the phone down. He rests his head against the kitchen wall and exhales.

He considers running away, but he has no coat, no boots, and frankly, nowhere to go. Moreover, they appear to still be on Big House property. Loki couldn't get past the fence or watchtowers if he tried.

Loki peers over at Duntsch, who is still snoring resonantly on the couch with Laika curled up next to him and his fly is partially undone. He doesn't look like he'll be waking up anytime soon. Loki takes the opportunity to snoop around Duntsch's house. He doesn't know what he's looking for. A clue, perhaps - *something* to back up Duntsch's outrageous promise. Loki would hate to prove himself so gullible. He's already feeling iffy about the blowjob he just gave. He isn't sure why he did it. It's not like he was forced. Loki thinks of Thor, down in the Compound, all alone, and feels deeply ashamed.

First things first. Loki makes his way back towards the living room, where he'd left the half-empty box of chocolates, and pops one in his mouth out of spite.

"I'll get fat if I want," Loki tells him, softly.

Without even thinking, Loki moseys towards Duntsch's Christmas tree. He can't help it. It's as if he's drawn to it by a magnetic pull. It's just so glittering and colourful, with fragile-looking glossy bulbs and twinkling lights. Almost....tantalizing. Loki picks a few needles off a branch and rolls them between his fingers. The smell is wonderful - so fresh, unlike his cabin's dank, musty odor. Loki hasn't been party to a Christmas like this since....well, since Odin died. Loki kneels down beside the pile of festively-wrapped presents and inspects them closely. Most of them are for Laika, but quite a few are addressed to Loki. Some Duntsch had addressed to himself, the weirdo. Maybe it's childish, but Loki wants his gifts. He'd missed so many Christmasses. He was never doted on like other kids. His childhood was cut so short.

Fuck it. Loki starts to rip open a present addressed to him. It's Christmas Eve after all, and it's not

like Loki's been given a lot of Christmas presents in his life. He braces himself for something skeezy, like a sex toy or something, so he isn't at all surprised to find that it's more lingerie - a little black bralette and matching panties with garters. Loki rolls his eyes and sets it aside. But the other presents are less easy to hate: warm socks, gloves, a cozy-looking green sweater, and a few toiletries that are probably meant for women. Duntch even got him a magic kit for kids. The kitschy props are far, far below Loki's skill level, but at least it's better than more panties.

Leaning against the far wall is a long, thin package with weird protrusions also addressed to Loki. This gives Loki pause. He'd recognize that size and shape anywhere. Carefully, Loki slips the package past the tree and rips the wrapping paper off. As he suspected, it's....a skateboard. A fucking skateboard. And an expensive one too, Loki can tell. Loki hadn't skateboarded since his last one was stolen - poetic justice, perhaps, for all those times Loki had escaped by skateboard after he himself had been caught stealing. It's an undeniably beautiful board, much nicer than the first one he'd had. The underside is embellished with an (admittedly) badass coiled snake design. Loki can't help but admire it, although it *is* pretty creepy that Duntch would know that he was ever a skateboarder. That must've also been in Loki's file, alongside with god knows what other information. Loki vaguely remembers having offhandedly mentioned his skateboarding to Thor once or twice in their cabin. It's unsettling that so much of their private conversations were listened in on and recorded.

Still, Loki itches to get on the board and take it for a spin. It's been so many years since he's last skateboarded; he's missed the feeling of freedom that comes with coasting down a freshly paved sidewalk. There's nowhere to test-ride it in here, so he sets it down on the carpet and eats another chocolate.

A few more lingerie sets later, Loki gives up on presents and resumes idly wandering around Duntch's house. He pauses here and there to rifle through drawers, although he finds nothing of particular interest. He doesn't at all feel bad about invading Duntch's privacy. After all, hadn't Duntch invaded *his* privacy by using information gleaned from his and Thor's bugged cabin?

Loki meanders into what must be Duntch's bedroom next. It's about as nice and as bland as the rest of the house. A giant television dominates the opposite side of the room from the bed. He imagines himself sleeping here, next to Duntch, night after night, and his heart aches.

On the floor by Duntch's bed is something conspicuously out of place: a plain cardboard box. Loki feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, though he couldn't say why. It's like the box is emitting an energy. It feels..... alive. Loki is moving towards it before he even knows it. He pulls back the box's flaps.

It feels like an out of body experience to see himself staring out from the covers of video tapes, but that's not what first catches Loki's eye. It's that logo: *Sunny Day Productions*, embellished with the exact same flower Loki has tattooed on his lower back. Loki knew these tapes existed, but he'd

never seen them in person before. He picks a tape up at random and flips it over. He can't read the back cover's text - he's not sure he'd want to - but he knows enough to discern the copyright date: 1996. This year. That means Sunny's still around. Still around and still profiting off Loki's body.

One of the VHS covers is missing its corresponding tape, and Loki instinctively peers over his shoulder towards the television and VCR. He knows he shouldn't look. But he can't stop himself. He turns the television on and sets it to the correct channel. He rewinds the tape and hits play.

It begins with a poorly animated sun and flower, as if this were a kid's show or some shit. Loki fast-forwards through the intro and through another girl's feature - a mass of writhing, fleshy bodies - until he sees himself on screen. At once, the air is punched out of his lungs. It's shocking how young he looks on tape. Young and somewhat spaced out. The outfit Sunny had put him in doesn't help things either - it's not that dissimilar from the outfit Loki's in right now. Loki gets the sense that this wasn't a scene he did with Sunny, which means it was one of *those* shoots. A leaden weight settles in Loki's stomach, but he can't tear his eyeballs away. He needs to see it. He's always wondered if he looked like he hated it. Maybe the existence of his porn tapes wouldn't bother him so much if Loki knew he appeared willing in them. Having men jerk off to his scenes wouldn't seem so bad if he knew he looked like he was enjoying what was being done to him.

And he *did* enjoy it, at least sometimes, when it was just him and Sunny doing the scene. That's the kicker. Sunny was, hands down, the best sex of his life. Being made love to by him was like being worshipped. He played Loki like a virtuoso musician. He made every nerve in Loki's body sing. And although Loki wasn't crazy about their lovemaking being on tape for posterity, at least with Sunny, he always came.

But more than that. Sunny was mesmerizing - the most naturally charming person Loki had ever met. He was older, not terribly handsome, but he was tall, lanky, had a wide, impish grin and sparkling grey eyes and an easygoing bearing, as if perpetually unbothered by whatever came his way. Sunny lived as if every day were a day at the beach.

He dazzled Loki when they first met. Loki could tell what he was straight away, but Sunny wasn't anything like what his mother told him to watch out for. Sunny was mellow and disarmingly unthreatening, like a goofy uncle. Hard to be intimidated by a man who'd spout bad puns with relish and whose day-to-day wardrobe consisted almost entirely of garish, technicolour Hawaiian shirts. Sunny weaseled his way past Loki's reservations with masterful skill. He was patient. He took his time. He was like a spider weaving a web.

When Loki finally slept with him, it felt more like a natural progression rather than something that Sunny had predetermined. Loki didn't feel coerced at all; rather, he felt *seduced*. Sunny gentled him like a scared animal. He cracked lame jokes to lessen Loki's unease. He wasn't pushy or demanding, and he focused entirely on Loki's pleasure. When he took Loki out on the town - which he often did in those early days - *all* his attention was on Loki, as if nobody else mattered in

the entire world. He treated Loki as special, as worthy of affection and praise. He listened when Loki talked and held him when he cried. He vetted Loki's johns and was always ready to come at a moment's notice if a trick went sour. This, Loki later learned, was what's called a *honeymoon period*.

Because Sunny wielded his affection like a weapon. He could turn it on on a whim, or withhold it to get his way. His cold shoulder stung worse than his fist. And sometimes Sunny would purposefully bestow his attention on one of his other boys or girls, right in Loki's face, just to remind Loki what he wasn't getting. It's what made Loki so desperate to please him. It's what made Loki trick with whoever Sunny told him to, and how he got Loki to agree to do porn in the first place. Sunny never locked him up; he didn't have to. The shackles were all psychological.

Once the bloom of Loki's shyness started to wear off, Sunny decided it was time to toughen Loki up. Skittishness was only appealing on actual virgins, which Loki, by then, was decidedly not. Loki was too sensitive, too meek, cried too easily, bruised too readily, required too much hand-holding. His neediness became something of a chore to deal with. Nobody wanted a whore who'd cry for their mother at the drop of a hat. Never mind that Loki was just a kid, a newly-orphaned teenager. Never mind that Loki must've had some fucked up experiences to wind up in this industry at such a young age. Heaven forbid they'd be reminded that Loki was a human being worthy of sympathy.

Sunny had designs to mold Loki into his top call boy. Loki had the looks, the body, that striking eye colour, and no pesky relatives to come looking for him. All that was required was that Loki learn to fuck the way clients wanted. And learn this Loki did, maybe too well.

I'm very open minded, was what Sunny trained him to say.

Behind Sunny's laid-back persona was a cutthroat ambition. Sunny didn't just want to make money; he wanted to make a name for himself. He wanted *influence*, friends in high places. He was hoping to score a few elite city officials as clients, and in this he was successful. It's because he never pretended to be one of them. He was chummy yet still somewhat fawning, never hiding his lowly origins, which made him a fun novelty to have at soirees. And he was reliable. Rich people like a man who can get them what they want, and often what they want is an assortment of pretty young faces to spice up their parties. Sunny could always deliver. He made it his *business* to deliver. He had the prettiest, youngest faces in town. And what better way to advertise than with a few sleazy porn tapes?

Sunny told him if he ever ran away he'd get picked up and deported, that he'd become one of those poor suckers going missing at the northern border. Loki thought Sunny was trying to scare him into staying. He thought Sunny was exaggerating the statistics. But in the end, Sunny was right. It all happened exactly as he'd said.

Loki senses a presence behind him. He turns. Duntsch is standing there in the doorway, looking horrified.

“I can explain...”

"What's there to explain," Loki says expressionlessly. "I made porn."

"I'm sorry, you're just so beautiful," Duntsch stammers. He moves towards the box of cassette tapes. "I'll get rid of them..."

"No, no," says Loki, stopping him with a hand to Duntsch's chest. "Let's watch it. I want to see it."

“We really don’t have to-”

“Shh.”

Loki watches it almost like a nature documentary - strangely detached, or maybe just numb. He’d cried so many tears over this that he supposes he’s got none left to shed. Or maybe he’s simply been too preoccupied with his current situation to feel too much angst about it. It’s hard to get hung up about one particular traumatic memory when pretty much the entirety of Loki’s life has been garbage.

Video-Loki looks like he’s certainly *trying* to act like he wants to be there, but there’s no mistaking the flinch when the male talent comes into the frame. It’s in his eyes, which keep darting off-camera to where Sunny was no doubt standing guard, ready to swoop in with a pep talk if Loki tried to bail. Loki doesn’t even remember filming this; all his post-Sunny scenes blur together into one horrible prolonged drug-addled nightmare. Nor does he recognize who his top was, although it doesn’t really matter. They were just faceless props. The point is, those men raped him, and Sunny not only allowed it, but *facilitated* it. He directed them to fuck that way. He stood there and watched and then sold the footage afterwards.

Loki now sees what Thor meant when he called Loki’s sexual persona *weird*. It is. Loki doesn't look like himself; hell, he hardly looks human. That's not his real voice, or his mannerisms. He's nothing like this in real life, so simpering and overly-sexual and fake. No self-respecting person acts like that in bed. Worse still, is that Loki doesn’t know how *not* to be like that. If he’d actually managed to have sex with Thor, how much of it would he actually enjoy, or remember? He can’t help that his true self goes dormant as soon as any sexual activity is involved. He couldn’t be present in sex even if he tried. What comes out instead is *that person*, that slutty character, that

empty husk. It's the defence mechanism he'd donned to distance himself from what was being done to him. Loki's porn persona could take abuse the way the real Loki couldn't. How could Loki ever be truly intimate with Thor, being the way he is? The one man Loki has ever loved, and Loki is too damaged to make love to him in an authentic, healthy, honest way.

Watching this kills the last bit of affection Loki ever had for Sunny. Sunny made him into that. Sunny *ruined* him. Loki will never have a normal relationship because of how bad Sunny fucked him up. Sunny never loved him. Loki was stupid for believing Sunny gave a single shit about him ever. He's embarrassed he ever considered Sunny to be his boyfriend. And he'll always have this fucking trashy-ass tattoo, *Sunny's brand*, for the rest of his life as a reminder.

"Did you cum to this?"

Duntsch makes a vague uncomfortable noise and clears his throat.

"It's a yes or no question. Which part did it for you? Was it where he chokes me with his cock until I gag? Where he hits me and calls me a dumb bitch? Where he spits in my face? I'm just wondering."

"I wasn't--"

"The video was in your VCR! I had to rewind the tape to watch it! Or do you really think I'm that stupid?" Loki feels his eyes burning. The seething rage that had been festering inside him all evening finally erupts in one spectacular burst: "I've always wondered what kinda person would be turned on by that. Turns out its normal men. Men that think they ain't hurtin' no one. Right? Guess what. *You* drove demand for it. *You* made a market for it. My pimp made me do it cos this is the kind of shit people want to see. I got raped so bad, more times than I remember. That's what you're watching. Immortalized for all time for fuckers like you to jack off to. I've been hit and spit on, choked until I almost passed out. Do you care about that? I'm fucking crying in the scene, and don't you dare tell me you don't see it. They must've cut every time I begged for him to stop. Drugged me up so I wouldn't make a fuss. You don't know or care whether I was trafficked or coerced. You don't care that I was a kid. I'm just some piece of ass on a cassette tape to you. Well, here I am. I'm a human being. I'm not some doll you can dress up or a toy you can play with. I have *feelings*. I have hopes and dreams like anyone. Fuck you. You're not fucking sorry. You think you're better than me cos I'm just a sex worker. Because you're *soooo* much smarter and classier than me. Right? I'm sorry I don't know shit. Maybe it's because nobody wants *their kid* sitting next to a filthy sex worker kid in school. And I'm sorry I eat like a slob; I was too busy scrounging in dumpsters to learn how to hold a goddamn fork. I'm a stupid whore, and a thief, but at least I'm good enough to fuck. Right? That's the only worthwhile thing about me. People like you look down on me for what I am, as if you had no part in making me this way. You judge me for giving you the service *you paid me for*. And all the while, you expect me to smile and play nice and stroke your ego while you get off on degrading me. It's men like *you* who've made my life hell!"

Loki stops, panting heavily. He wishes he wasn't still wearing the lingerie.

He stands tall, squares his shoulders and, as calmly as possible, says, "I want to go back to the lab now."

Duntsch stares back at him, wide-eyed. "Yes. Yes, I think that would be wise."

Loki wants to scream. He could trash this fucking lab, destroy every fucking cassette tape in here. How *dare* Duntsch drag his poor dead mother into this? Dangle her over his nose like some kind of sick reward? He must really think Loki is an idiot, to try and make him believe all that fucking crazy nonsense. Loki's angry at himself for falling for it. He's angry that he sucked Duntsch off for no goddamn reason, like the slut Sunny made him into.

"Don't touch me," Loki snarls at Moo. "I don't belong here, do you understand? I shouldn't be here. I didn't agree to come. They had no right to take me. I belong to Commander Red. *I belong to Commander Red*. And I don't want to watch any more fucking Andy Hardy movies!"

Moo just stands there looking hurt and confused. Loki hates him too. He hates being stuck down here in movie hell. He hates Moo's stupid malformed face and his stupid limp dick and his stupid velcro sneakers.

Loki takes a deep breath and reins himself in. "I'm sorry. I know none of this is your fault," he says, although it kind of is. "I'm just having a bad day, I guess...."

Loki is ashamed that he ever even considered Duntsch's offer for a single nanosecond. How could he live with himself, knowing he'd left Thor behind? Loki would regret it for the rest of his life. No amount of prescription pills would take away the heartache of knowing he'd let Thor slip from his fingers.

"I'm from the Compound. I'm not sure you know what that is, but it's some kinda processing facility for.....that place you drew. My brother is trapped down there. He doesn't know where I am. He probably thinks they took me. I'm scared he - I'm scared...He's sick in the head. He might -"

Loki chokes up. He can't say it. The thought of Thor harming himself is too painful to bear.

"He's not really my brother, I guess I should stop saying that. What I feel for him is....so much more than that. So much more than I could ever put into words."

Moo is staring at him. Loki's not sure how much of this he understands. But Loki doesn't care. He needs to say the entire thing aloud.

"You want to hear a real love story, Moo?"

"When I was really little, my mom and I moved in with a man called Odin. My mom and Odin were together, but they weren't married. My mom just acted like his wife. Odin was an army vet; he ran a successful mechanic's shop. He had one glass eye from the War. I remember he used to pop it out at me. I think he was trying to make me laugh, but I thought it was his real eye and it terrified me.

"Odin had a son - Thor. Thor was about ten years older than me. I guess he would've been about fourteen when we met, but he always seemed so much bigger. Larger than life. I thought he was so cool, like an older brother. He was kind of a jerk to me, I guess you could say. If he wasn't ignoring me he was ordering me around, but I didn't mind. I *liked* doing things for him. I adored him right from the get-go. And for a long time, we were something like a little happy family.

"When I was seven, A man named Mr. Bjornsson came to town. He was Odin's best friend from the War. They were in the same unit or something. He used to get fall-down drunk with Odin in our kitchen. Other times he'd hang out at the garage and help Odin with odd jobs. I knew him as Mr. Bee.

"Mr. Bee was really nice to me. He paid more attention to me than anyone ever had - more than my mom, even. I kind of liked it, at first. I didn't know any better. He gave me candies and chocolates and little toys and stuff. I guess you could say he was grooming me. He was the kind of man who liked little boys, in the way that no grown man should. He couldn't have picked an easier target. I was quiet, painfully shy - a neglected little sex worker boy. Who would notice, or even

care? My mom was battling a pill addiction at the time. And even if she suspected something was up, I'm not sure what she would've done about it. When you got a daddy like Odin, the last thing you wanna do is rock the boat. I think Thor suspected something, though. Thor always disliked Mr. Bee.

"It started to get really weird after Mr. Bee moved in with us. I guess he'd fallen on hard times, so Odin offered him our guest room until he got back on his feet. None of us liked it, but Odin was the boss, and once he'd made a decision it was *not* open for discussion. Mr. Bee suddenly had more access to me than ever before. He started to get pushier, more aggressive. His touches lingered longer, and drifted lower, and sometimes he'd make me touch him too. I remember not liking it, although at the time I couldn't say why. It felt wrong to me somehow. Mr. Bee told me that if I said anything he'd make sure Odin would kick both my mom and I out. I believed him. He said I was just going to turn out to be a whore anyway, just like my mom, so I might as well get used to it. *Naturally provocative* is what he called me, as if it was my fault I was getting molested. As if a little kid could ever do anything to bring that kind of attention on themselves.

"One morning, he cornered me in the kitchen. I can't remember where Odin or my mom was at the time. He put his hand down my shorts. Thor walked in on us. I'd *never* seen Thor so pissed. He called Mr. Bee a bunch of words I didn't really understand. Words like *pervert*, *pedophile*. It blew me away. I'd never in my life had anyone stand up for me like that - let alone Thor, the brother I adored.

"Thor took my hand and got me in his car. We went for ice cream. That was the first time I remember us actually...hanging out, although I don't think *he* had any ice cream. He just smoked a cigarette and watched me eat my cone in the parking lot. He didn't say anything except to ask me how long that had been going on. He told me grown men shouldn't do that kinda stuff to kids. He even called me by my name - Loki. Usually he just called me Runt.

"That night, Thor had me sleep in his room. He laid a blanket on the floor at the foot of his bed and made me a little nest. I guess he suspected Bjornsson would come looking for me. Actually, we know for a *fact* he did, because Thor put a small piece of tape over my bedroom doorway and it was broken in the morning. But Bjornsson didn't dare come into Thor's room. Oh, no. Bjornsson was scared of Thor. I slept at the foot of Thor's bed the entire summer Bjornsson stayed with us. It was so thrilling, like having a sleepover with your best friend every night. Not that Thor ever really talked to me or anything. But I didn't mind. I was happy just to be near him. I was grateful that he cared enough to help me. He was my protector, my refuge, my sanctuary. I didn't leave his side all summer. He made sure to cart me around wherever he went so I wouldn't find myself alone with Mr. Bee. I'd rifle through the junkyard to find cans for him to practice his shooting. I'd linger behind the shop as he worked on his car. He might've been a jerk at times, but he never made me feel like less of a human being, unlike a lot of people. He helped me without expecting anything in return. I'm not sure you know how rare that is in this world.

"One time - this is funny - one time he brought me along on a date with this girl he was seeing. We went to a drive-in movie theatre. I was in the backseat; Thor and his girlfriend were in the front.

Poor Thor! He was probably looking to get laid, but instead he had my dumb little ass staring at him through the rearview mirror. The moodkill to end all moodkills. I'm sure the girlfriend wasn't too impressed either. They did kiss a bit, though. It made my chest hurt to watch. Literal, physical pain. Even as a seven year old I knew I wanted Thor to kiss me like that.

"Thor confronted Odin about it, but Odin didn't believe him, and anyway Bjornsson denied it. Odin thought Thor was out to make trouble - which, to be fair, Thor often was. Thor tried to get me to back up his story, but I was too scared to say anything. I really thought Odin might kick me and my mom out. I still remember how frustrated Thor was with me. I hated disappointing him.

"Odin did send Bjornsson away eventually, in large part because Thor wouldn't shut up about it. My mom was putting pressure on Odin too, although honestly I dunno what she could've done for me on her own without Thor's help. She was always grateful to him for that.

"Bjornsson would've raped me, I know it. He was working up to it. And he would've gotten away with it too, if Thor hadn't intervened. I never forgot that. Despite everything, I'm glad, at least, I didn't lose my virginity when I was seven.

"But as much as I was relieved to have Mr. Bee gone, a part of me knew that that would be the end of my time with Thor. And it was. Things more or less went back to the way they were before. Thor started his senior year of high school and I went back to sleeping in my little bedroom under the basement stairs. But by then my crush had morphed to a straight-up obsession. I used to steal his dirty shirts to sniff them. I was such a creepy little weirdo. I couldn't stop staring at him, either. It used to piss him off so much. I had all these feelings that I didn't know what to do with. My world was so small, and Thor was by far the biggest thing in it.

"The following summer after Thor graduated, he and Odin had a huge fight. It was probably about the shop, but I couldn't say for sure - they fought *a lot* in those days. The two of them literally trashed the kitchen. Broke bottles, threw shit at each other. Thor just up and left. Tossed his stuff in his car and sped off. I sometimes think he looked back at me before driving away...but I could be misremembering. I was crushed. It was as though a piece of my heart had been torn from me. I knew, deep down, Thor would never be coming back. And he didn't. Not when Odin had the stroke that left him half-paralyzed, and not when Odin finally died. My mom didn't have any way of contacting Thor to alert him - he hadn't left a forwarding address or a phone number - and so the house was foreclosed on by the bank. My mom and I were kicked out, and that's when my childhood officially ended. I was thirteen.

"My mom, she did her best to take care of us, but all she had were a few valuables she'd managed to swipe from Odin's estate, and the money she'd made selling them ran out quick. At night she'd leave me alone to go work, which was always scary because she didn't have a safe place for me to stay in the meantime and working was really dangerous. But how else could we make money? No one would ever hire us for a normal job. We were dirt poor, no papers, no real schoolin'. You get

desperate living like that. So when an older man offers you a place to live in exchange for your company, you say *yes*. Doesn't even matter what kind of a man he is. Anything is better than streetwalking. It became my job to keep him happy the way my mom kept Odin happy. And in return he gave us a tenement.

"I know my mom felt guilty for staying there. She felt bad because now *I* was the one who was working. She hated that I was going down the same road she did. Her drug problem got worse and worse until one day....I guess she took too much by accident. I *hope* it was an accident. I don't think she meant to die, but she did. I was inconsolable. Truly, truly inconsolable. I cried nonstop for weeks. Months. Grief like that consumes you. It still does. It's been six and a half years since that morning. I think about it every day.

"My daddy got tired of me pretty quick after that. I was kind of a downer, you could say - not that much fun to be around. Besides which, I was going through puberty, and I'd grown almost to my adult height in a few short months. My daddy was the kind of man who liked boys, but not when those boys got taller than him. He started coming over less and less, giving me less money, until one day he packed me in his car, drove me to the bus depot, and told me I could go live with his friend, an old classmate of his. I begged and begged to stay, but he'd already made up his mind. He wasn't interested in me anymore. I had nowhere else to go, so I went. That classmate turned out to be not so nice, and I ran away after six months. Then I was well and truly alone.

"I spent some time on the streets - on the pier, actually - performing card tricks and pickpocketing and doing other kinds of unsavory things. I never forgot about Thor, though. I fantasized about him all the time. I pictured him going on grand adventures, exploring the world, doing all these exciting things. I even thought about hiring a private detective to find him, but I didn't have nearly enough money for that. I just wanted to have *someone*. Someone to rely on so I wouldn't have to look over my shoulder all the goddamn time. I was so tired of being on my own, so tired of struggling, so tired of feeling like no one cared about me. And then I met Sunny.

"I don't really want to talk about what Sunny was; suffice it to say he was the kind of man who knew *exactly* how to get what he wanted out of a poor street kid like me. He played me like a fiddle. He sensed just how desperate I was to be loved, and he gave me what I thought was love. I thought I loved him too, for a while. But people who love you don't make you do the kinds of things Sunny made me do. Sunny hurt me worse than anyone. And I let him, to be honest. Every time it got bad he'd go back to treating me the way he did when we first met, and I'd inevitably cave. I stuck around way longer than I should've. I was scared to leave. I had nowhere to go. I was trapped.

"I wanted so badly for Thor to rescue me. I thought if I found him, he'd make everything okay. Just like when I was a kid. You know? I thought we'd cross paths and he'd see I was in trouble and sweep me away on the spot, like a superhero or something.

“But that's not what happened. What happened was one day I couldn't take it anymore. I ran away from Sunny and went back to my life of pickpocketing and petty theft. But I was sloppy and got caught. I didn't have any papers so the city deported me. Our caravan was hijacked along the way and I was trafficked north. That's how I wound up at the Compound. That's how I finally found Thor.

“Turns out he wasn't world-travelling. He wasn't living a glamorous jetset lifestyle. He was a soldier in the Compound. All this time, he was in the Compound. That fucking hellhole. In that miserable shack, with the freezing winters and shitty food and endless drudgery. He recognized me when I came in and brought me to live with him. What he paid for me, I don't know. I cried so hard that first night. Not because I'd wound up in the Compound - although that was certainly a part of it - but because the truth of how Thor had actually been living *devastated* me. He'd suffered as bad as I had in the twelve years we were apart. And he looked like it, too. My once beautiful brother had been worn down from years of hard living. His honey-cloured hair was all matted and gross. His eyes were sunken in from all those nights he'd spent being terrorized by nightmares. He wouldn't even smile because of the pain from his rotten teeth. He drank too much, smoked too much. Christ, he has fucking panic attacks on our bathroom floor. It broke my heart to see him like that.

“And he was different than I thought he'd be. I guess I built him up in my head to be someone else. Someone less...harsh. I know he's not a bad person. He's sick. So sick. That place has poisoned him. I don't think he even knows what's real anymore. He says such scary things sometimes and I can't tell whether he's losing his mind or if what he's saying is true. Strangest of all, he doesn't seem to remember anything about me...he doesn't remember what he did for me when I was a kid. It's as though I was almost completely wiped from his memory. I spent twelve years obsessed over him, and he'd hardly thought of me at all.

“The crazy part is, I love him just the same. I can't help it. I want him as badly as I did when I was a kid. I don't care how sick he is. I don't care that he's a jerk sometimes; I don't care that he's not interested in men. I don't care if he ever loves me back. I just need to see him again. I want him to know that I love him. I wish I'd told him that when I had the chance. This might sound delusional, but somehow I feel like him and me were always meant to be together....”

Loki falls silent. The prospect of losing Thor again, after having had him for a few short months, makes his heart wrench agonizingly in his chest. How cruel to have had him for such a brief period of time, only for him to be snatched away by forces outside Loki's control. It's worse than having never found him at all. The hopelessness of this situation consumes him. Loki curls into himself and rests his head on his knees. He can feel the wetness from his eyes seep into the fabric of his jeans.

"People like me don't get happy endings. That's just how movies end. That's not the way the real world works. In the real world bad people get away with doing bad things all the time. And good people suffer for no reason."

Loki looks up to find Moo standing in front of him. The last thing Loki wants right now is to be fondled, or worse, *tickled*, but all Moo does is open his giant mitt of a hand to show him something: it's the deck of cards Loki had brought last time he was here. Loki had left it behind in the ensuing chaos after his successful sample extraction.

"I'm not in the mood for tricks right now."

Moo clumsily flips the top card with his thick, puffy fingers. It's a joker, but the entire face of the card is covered in tiny, wobbly writing: *Moo's* handwriting.

"You know I can't read, Moo," Loki says, annoyed.

Moo simply slides the card randomly into the middle of the deck and closes Loki's hand around it, squeezing tightly for emphasis. And Loki *gets it*. This is information he must keep safe, he must keep hidden. And although Loki doesn't know what he's supposed to do with a card he can't read, while being held prisoner in a lab he can't escape, he clutches the deck to his chest protectively nonetheless.

"Thank you," Loki whispers.

Mrs. White sighs, like an exasperated parent.

"Mooncalf. Mooncalf. Why must you vex me so. I got you your favourite toy, but you won't play with him."

Moo just stands there dumbly with a thin string of drool hanging from his lower lip. One would think that being brought up from the lab would illicit some reaction in him - excitement, fear, interest, something. But no. Moo is as serene and spaced-out as ever. White's magnificent library does not seem to register with him at all. Loki, meanwhile, is sweating bullets. And by the looks of it, so is Duntsch.

"I've been very patient with you," White goes on. "I've done everything I could to see to your well-being. I've brought you every video tape I could find. I ask so very little of you in return. And what I ask is not even unpleasant."

Still, silence. The thread of drool finally snaps and trickles down the front of Moo's shirt, leaving a trail of moisture in its wake. White's plush lips curl in disgust and barely veiled contempt.

"Or is it you." Her eyes shift and fix on Loki. "What part of collecting a semen sample was unclear to you. I related my wishes as straightforwardly as possible. Or are you as stupid as Black says?"

Duntsch interjects, "Ma'am-"

"*What.*"

Duntsch visibly swallows. "He's trying, ma'am, I've seen him. He can do it, he just needs a bit more time-"

"Defending him, are you? Fucking pathetic, trying to win over some sex worker. *You're* the one who couldn't make the last sample work. *You're* the one who told me we would be finished with this by now. Maybe *you're* the one to blame for this egregious lack of progress."

Duntsch's mouth snaps shut. He mumbles an apology and melts back into the background.

White turns her attention back to Loki. "Well? What is it then? Are you stupid or are you not trying?"

"I just want to talk to my brother," Loki says, barely above a whisper.

“Your brother. Your *brother*. Always droning on and on about your fucking brother. I bet he doesn’t even know what a filthy slut you are. Hmm? Does he know about all the fine work you did with Mr. Sunny Day? We didn’t have to look far to find your tapes, you know. They’re in every seedy twenty-four hour sex shop in [REDACTED]. You’re quite popular, I’m told. A high seller. How fitting, since my Mooncalf does love his movie stars...”

She gets up from her desk and slinks towards him. Loki wants to recoil, but there are far too many of White's bodyguards in here for him to go anywhere.

“And yet, with all your considerable expertise, you continue to fail in this one task. This one task which should, by all accounts, be your forte. I can’t help but feel you are denying me on purpose. Perhaps some incentive is required?” She announces to the roomful of cronies: “Effective immediately, for every day I do not get a sample, see to it that one of Commander Red's remaining teeth is pulled.”

Loki inhales sharply. “*Ma’am.*”

White gets right in Loki’s face. Her eyes are wild and vicious. “You thought I was fucking around before? *Do I look like someone who fucks around?* I’ll have holes drilled in them, too, so you can wear them around your neck. So that you’ll know *exactly* what your inaction has wrought.”

“Please don’t,” Loki begs. “Ma’am. Please. I’m sorry. I’ll do it. I’ll do it.”

“You’d better,” White says. “Because you won’t like what’ll happen when he runs out of teeth.”

Beside Loki, Moo appears to be miming a writing gesture, ostensibly to indicate that he's got something to say. White takes notice and rolls her eyes.

“Get him a pen.”

Moo is handed a pad and pen by the orderlies behind him. But rather than write a note, Moo drops the pad and uses the pen to quickly and repeatedly stab himself right in the genitals. It happens so fast Loki can hardly process what it is he's seeing. The fact that Moo does it soundlessly, with single-minded resoluteness, is what makes the scene especially disturbing and shocking to witness.

Everything devolves into chaos after that. White is screaming like a harpy for her men to stop him.

It takes both orderlies and two more guards to wrench the pen from Moo's grasp, but by then the damage has already been done: the entirety of Moo's groin, including his testicles, is now nothing but a raw mangled *useless* open wound.

Within the span of a few short seconds, White hurries to her desk, opens the drawer, pulls out her gun, and with a jarring *BAM-BAM-BAM*, shoots Moo three times right in his lopsided skull. Moo crumples to the ground in a grisly heap; his brains are splattered on the shelves of books behind him as blood continues to gush from the self-inflicted wounds in his crotch.

White whirls on Duntsch, still brandishing her gun. Her face is contorted with unbridled, terrifying fury.

"You swore this time it would work!"

Duntsch looks absolutely *horrified*. "I thought it would, Ma'am..."

"You told me this one would be stable! You told me we were past all this fucking bullshit!"

Duntsch babbles a string of nonsensical desperate apologies, but White isn't having any of it.

"Start over," she seethes. "We start over. Today. *Now*. As many fucking tries as it takes."

"There aren't enough conscripts-"

"*Find more!*"

Her gaze lands on Loki. Her eyes are black, completely and unnaturally black.

"Send this whore to the Rig."

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, our happy ending is on the horizon :)

six of nine

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year and Happy Valentine's Day! I wish I could've made this chapter more romantic...but instead it's probably going to give everyone a stress ulcer
¬_(ツ)_/

IMPORTANT TW: I added a scene with non-penetrative sexual assault (groping) and an implied threat of sexual violence. Also TW for some brief violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thor couldn't say how long he's been down here. Days, probably. There's no way to tell. He has no stomach for the food they bring. Nor can he find rest. All he does is exist. Exist and wait.

Distantly, he hears his cell door open and footfalls on the cold, concrete floor. He doesn't even look up from where he's curled up against the wall.

"Red, Red, Red," sighs a voice.

In his periphery, Thor blearily tracks a pair of shiny black boots until they come to a stop in front of him. The person crouches down.

"No appetite again today huh? Shame, I had this made special just for you." Black jabs at the cold, congealed fried chicken sandwich he'd sent down some hours before with his index finger. "You gotta eat, buddy, you're wasting away. You ain't hungry?"

Thor says nothing. There's nothing *to* say.

Black's hand is on his shoulder. "I need you to pull yourself together. You've done it before. Remember how it was when you first came here? Like a scared little boy, fresh from that meat market. Everyone thought you were just another recruit - little more than a miserable conscript. Not me. I saw your potential; I've been cultivating it for more than a decade. You wouldn't have survived without me. You know that. You were always my favourite."

"I'm turning, Black," Thor whimpers.

To his credit Black doesn't deny it. "Yeah," he acknowledges. "Yeah. It's okay. It was always gonna happen. You're taking to it so well. *You're meant for it*. More than anyone I've ever seen. There's no point in fighting it."

"I'll kill myself before it takes hold."

"Red buddy, you know I couldn't let you do that," chides Black gently. "You're far too valuable. What you are, what you will become, is somethin' truly special. Honest to God! I wouldn't be investin' so much time and energy into you if you weren't gonna be worth it."

"I'll climb the fence first chance I get. I'll blow my head off. I'll hang from a sheet. I don't care."

Black nods, almost guiltily. "Yeah. Things have been tough on you lately. I know you've been

through a lot, especially since Jane died. Very sad, that. But it's time for you to let her go. I understand there's been some confusion as to what ultimately became of her. Let me ask you this: d'you really think I didn't know about her degrees when she came in? *Me? I let you have her anyway.* That's how much I wanted you to be happy. She was a pretty gal and you were so smitten, I couldn't bear to refuse you. I thought it might help put some spring back in your step. Her death was tragic, but it was natural. A simple infection. You have to accept it. You saw her body."

Thor still doesn't look up. "Is *Loki* in the morgue too."

"I figured you might say something like that," Black says with a sigh. "I'll admit, we did ya dirty, takin' your boy away from you without your permission. That was wrong of us and I apologize. I wouldn't have allowed it, except that it was a direct order from Boss White. My hands were tied; I could do nothing about it. Hell, I didn't even know it was a for-sure thing until you barged into my office! And that really irked me because you know me, I like to be in the loop about everything 'round here. It was devastating to see you two split up. So when I realized I had the chance to make things right, I knew I had to take it. Call it a peace offering. A late Christmas present...."

Black gestures to his men outside the cell's bars, and shortly thereafter comes a great ruckus. Thor has to blink a few times dizzily to process what he's seeing.

"Loki...?"

"*Thor!*"

Thor launches himself to his feet just in time for Loki careen through the cell door and slam into him like a hurricane, much as he did the first night he came in. Except this time Thor's face is as wet as Loki's is, and Thor squeezes him back and doesn't let go.

"I want you to know that Boss White personally issued the order to send him to the Rig," Black goes on, softly, after allowing them a few minutes. "I have intervened at great risk to bring him back for you. I've called in every favour I could think of. Ask Loki. He'll tell you. He was Rig-bound just this morning. Believe me when I say your dear brother is now completely useless, both to myself and to White. We have nothing more to gain by taking him from you. We are in agreement that his best use is with you. So enjoy him. Let him bring you comfort through these long, cold, bitter nights."

Thor sobs against Loki and holds him tighter, savoring the substance of him, as if to confirm that what is happening is real. Loki is trembling violently against his chest, panting damp, hitching breaths into the crook of his neck.

"Now. In regards to our earlier discussion," Black goes on. "I know Loki's future is something of a concern to you, since as your wife his fate is tied to yours. It is unfortunately the case that so many soldier-widows tend to wind up at the brothel, or worse. I would hate for that to happen to Loki, and I know you would too. And so, I have a proposition for you: our head scientist Dr. Duntsch has expressed an interest in him. Nice guy - kind of a schmuck, but he has his own house. He'd treat Loki well, I promise you. I can arrange for Duntsch to take Loki afterward, but only if you see this through to the end. If you harm yourself in any way, or do anything to impede the transition, I would have no choice but to have Loki fulfill his original purpose as a conscript. It gives me no pleasure to issue you this ultimatum, but I will do what I must to ensure that the considerable investment I've put into you is not wasted. So. What d'you say. Shall we give Loki a way out?"

Thor's fate is sealed; there is nothing he can do about it now. Loki has to get out of here. And if it means Thor becomes what Black wants him to be....then so be it.

"Yes," he rasps.

"I knew you'd listen to reason." Black beams. "God. I love a happy ending! I'm a romantic myself, you know. Really warms my heart to see you two reunited. I'm going to have a fresh plate of food brought up, and I'd like you to stay until you eat it. After that, you're both free to go and enjoy the rest of the day. Rest up, relax. I'll expect you back in service first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thank you sir," Thor says, and means it. "Thank you."

"Course, course," Black says, though his voice trails off and becomes pensive. "Loki, sweetheart, what's that in your back pocket?"

It's only then that Loki extracts himself from Thor's embrace.

"Cards," he says. "I do card tricks."

"Ah yes. Our little resident magician. May I see?"

Loki mops off his face and reaches back to retrieve the deck from his jeans pocket. He pulls the cards out from their box and executes a bit of trick shuffling right there and then - impressive for how badly he's still shaking. He fans them out face down, just as he had for Thor.

"Pick a card, sir."

"Not that, you silly goose." Black says, deadpan, and holds out his hand. "The deck. Can I see it."

Loki passes it to him, and Black begins to rummage through the cards himself.

"We've cleared the deck already, sir," says one of Black's men from beyond the cell's bars.

"Yes, I'm sure," Black murmurs. Then, to no one in particular, he asks, "How many cards are there in a deck?"

"Fifty two, sir. Thirteen in every suite," answers Loki. "Plus the joker."

Black looks at him. Really looks at him, for what feels like several long, drawn out seconds. Then he laughs and tosses the deck back to Loki.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you, kiddo."

It's freezing cold outside as Thor pulls Loki in for another embrace.

"I thought I'd lost you," he breathes into Loki's ear. "I thought you were gone forever."

Loki sobs into his shoulder and clings to him desperately, like a life raft.

Thor pulls back and takes Loki's face in his hands. "Where did they take you? Are you hurt?"

Loki shakes his head and lets out a juddering exhale, which comes out as a wispy cloud of condensation. "I'm okay. Just shaken. Black was telling the truth - about the Rig. I was slated to be shipped out this morning." His eyes - always so crystalline, so mesmerizing - are glossy and pained. "I thought I was never gonna get to see you again."

"*Fuck*," croaks Thor, gathering Loki in his arms once more. "Fuck, Loki, I'm sorry. I'm sorry they

did that to you. I'm sorry you ever came here."

"What about you?" Loki asks, at length. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Thor forces a smile. "I'm okay."

"I was so worried you was gonna hurt yourself...."

"Nah," Thor says. "Everything's okay. Everything's gonna be just fine."

Loki looks at him oddly. "I can't help but feel....something is going on with you. Almost like you're - you're running out of time or something..."

"No more than anyone else here," Thor lies.

"That's not how Black made it sound."

"All he meant, was, soldiers like me get hurt or killed all the time. And he's right. If I die, you'll need somewhere to go. Somewhere safe. And I'll do what I have to do to ensure that that happens."

Loki shakes his head. "I don't want you to be indebted to Black on my account."

What Loki doesn't know is that Thor already had been indebted to Black. He always was. He always will be. He'd long ago resigned himself to the fact that he'll never escape this place. It's a part of him now. He might as well secure Loki a way out of here with what little time he has left; what happens to him afterwards is moot. Thor does not feel hung up about this whatsoever. On the contrary - he's never felt more at peace. It's a load off his mind to know Loki will have a place to go once he's gone. Black might be a slick son of a bitch, but Thor has never known him to explicitly renege on his word. Not to a Commander, anyway.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Thor says. "Let's go home."

"Wait," Loki stops him.

Loki pulls out a single playing card from within his sleeve and passes it to him. It's a joker, covered in small handwriting. Thor realizes Loki had hid this from Black using his sleight of hand.

"Where did you get this?"

"A friend," Loki says. He sounds anxious. "Why, what does it say?"

Thor squints at it. The letters are small and scribbly and hard to discern.

"Doesn't make any sense," Thor concludes at last. "It's not really English."

"What? What d'you mean, *not really English*?"

"The sentences are structured like English, but I've never even seen some of these words before. It's nonsense."

Loki's voice is shrill. "Are you sure? Couldja look again?"

"I dunno what to tell ya," says Thor, returning the card to Loki. "I think your friend must've been fuckin' with you."

Loki's eyes are wet as he inspects the card himself. "That can't be true. It's gotta say somethin'. It

has to."

Thor just sighs. "Let's go home, Loki."

Loki should feel glad to home in his little cabin. He should feel relieved to be here again with Thor, in the Compound, just as he wanted. But the adrenaline from the morning's events is still coursing through his veins. He feels anxious and restless. And pissed.

"Are you comin' to bed?" Thor calls from their bedroom.

"Yeah, in a minute."

Loki sits at their kitchen table and stares at the joker's text as if to will the words and their meaning to somehow be made clear to him. He refuses to believe he smuggled this fucking card out of the Big House for nothing - past two searches and then Black's inspection. It's got to say something. It has to.

"Goddamn it, Moo."

While Loki was expecting something to come of this, he certainly did not anticipate a visit from Black himself. His Van Dyke moustache is trim and tidy this early in the morning; usually by the time Loki sees him he's got a five o'clock shadow. His black hair is slicked back with pomade. Loki wishes Thor hadn't already left.

"Frau Odinson," Black greets with a nod, after Loki opens the door. "Morning'. May I come in?"

Black doesn't wait for Loki to agree before he brushes past him to let himself inside, along with the three soldiers trailing after him. None of them pay any heed to the sludge they're tracking onto Loki's floor.

"Like what you've done with the place. Is that coffee you got goin'? Be a dear and pour me a cup, won't cha?"

Loki opens his cupboard and retrieves a mug. He pours coffee into it, keeping his hand as steady as he can, and passes it to Black.

"I take milk."

Loki dutifully fetches the milk bottle from his icebox and splashes a bit in Black's coffee.

"And sugar, if you please."

Loki turns to his tin of sugar on his counter and spoons a bit inside.

"Oh, I like it sweet," Black says.

Loki adds another spoonful of sugar. This time Black accepts the mug and cradles his hands around it.

“Ah. thank you. Nice to warm my hands. It sure is nippy out there today. Hope the weather warms up for our big New Year’s bash. You haven’t been here long enough for one of our parties, have you?”

Loki shakes his head no.

“Oh, you're in for a treat. This year’s shindig should be one for the books.” Black takes a very loud slurpy sip. “Mm, delicious. This’ll help me perk up. Couldn’t sleep last night - had something on my mind. Do you know what it was?” Black pauses, but then answers anyway: “I was thinking about that other joker....”

“What other joker, sir.”

“Don’t play with me now, son.” Black holds his pointer and middle fingers up in a v. “Card decks always have *two* jokers.”

“I guess mine didn’t. Sir.”

Black gestures to the men behind him.

"Search the place. You're looking for a single playing card - a joker - so be thorough. The backing of the card has a blue paisley-like pattern. The face will likely have some kinda writing on it. Bring me the original deck when you find it. Loki darlin', you stay right where you are; you keep me company while I finish my coffee."

The three men Black brought start tearing through the cabin. One goes to the bedroom, one goes to the cellar and one stays in the kitchen and begins opening drawers and upsetting their contents onto the ground. All Loki’s cutlery is now scattered on the laminate tile floor. Loki can do nothing but stand there and watch.

“Ya know, I don’t think I’ve ever spoken two sentences to any of my other Commanders’ wives,” Black says conversationally as he stirs his coffee. His spoon makes an incongruously cheerful *clink* *clink* noise against the ceramic mug. “But here we are again, you and I. You’ve really been shaking things up since you arrived. Here I thought you were gonna be a quiet little house mouse to keep Red company at night. But no. You just had to make ol’ Moo go all crazy, didn’t cha? *Ugh*, and we had such high hopes for that one too. He was doing so well. Never had one last as long as he did. His predecessors all tended towards suicide and self-mutilation - if their congenital defects didn’t finish ‘em off first. An unstable lot. Quite tragic.” Black takes a sip of his coffee. “Tragic for me personally, as I was very much looking forward to retirement. Looks like we’ll all be at this for a few years longer, thanks to you.”

Loki just keeps standing there, watching blearily as the soldier in his kitchen begins sifting through his canisters of coffee, flour and sugar with his bare fingers, knowing full well he’ll have to use that stuff anyway - they can’t afford to be fussy. He can likewise hear the other two soldiers tearing apart the other rooms of his cabin, opening drawers and overturning furniture.

“You know what’s funny about all this Loki?” Black goes on. “Boss White was out for your blood. She really wanted to end your shit, let me tell ya. I vouched for you. I told her you’d keep your mouth shut. I said you were a smart boy who knew how to stay out of trouble, that you surely didn’t purposefully trigger Moo’s psychosis. I really put my balls on the line to bring you back. And yet, here you are, tryna punk me. I swear to God, I am not going to be made a fool of in front of Boss White. Do you understand? I am not going to let some two-bit illiterate whore get the best of me.”

"I could never outsmart a man like you, sir," is all Loki says.

Black stares at him piercingly.

"I was thinking, one piece of information noticeably absent from your file is the identity of your father...any idea who he might be?"

"I never met my father, sir."

"Was he a john?"

Loki half-shrugs. In truth he doesn't know for sure. He certainly wouldn't be surprised if that were the case, and frankly he doesn't really care. As far as he's concerned, his mother was his one and only parent.

Black seems to have expected Loki to be more sensitive about this. He digs deeper: "Some random creep paid to fuck your mom raw, huh? Hope she at least charged extra for it. I'm surprised she didn't abort you when she found out. Pregnancies tend to interfere with a prostitute's ability to generate an income. That being said, you sex workers sure do breed like rabbits. Gotta get that next generation up and working as quickly as possible, amirite? I'm not sure if you're aware of this, Loki, but there are some real sickos out there who'll pay through the nose for a kid."

Black smiles at his own cruel joke. Loki knows he knows the full story about Mr. Bee.

"Yes sir, I'm aware," says Loki at last.

"No wonder you turned out like this. No daddy to butch you up, teach you some goddamn self-respect. I'm tellin' ya - no son of mine would ever be caught dead prancing around in women's underwear on a video tape."

"I don't recall doing any prancing," Loki says absently, without really thinking; distracted, as he is, by the soldier in his kitchen now going through his fridge after having rummaged through his garbage.

Black whirls on him. "Do you think this is funny? Is this a joke to you? That shitwit Duntsch might find your prissy little act cute but trust me, I don't. This is a waste of my goddamn time, that's what this is. You know what your problem is? You never had a daddy to discipline you." Black cocks his head. His eyes are dark, bottomless, sharply intelligent and viciously cruel. "Do you need *discipline*, Loki?"

"Here's the deck, sir," one of Black's men interrupts. The soldier tosses the deck at Black and Black snatches it mid-air, rips open the box and starts tearing through the cards like a madman. Finding nothing of interest on the faces, Black begins to manually sort the deck on the dining table by number until all the cards are accounted for: all four suites of every number. Fifty two cards total.

....Plus exactly one joker.

"There's nothing, sir," one of Black's men says, having likewise concluded the sweep of the cabin.

"Okay I'm starting to get pissed," announces Black with a strained laugh. "Where's the other joker, Loki. Tell me now before I lose my pleasing disposition."

"There's only one joker, sir." Loki gestures to the lone joker card face up on the table. "That one right there."

Black looks him in the eye. "Are you sure 'bout that?"

"Yes sir. I'm sure."

"Need I remind you of my supreme dislike of being lied to. So I'm going to ask you that one last time." Black's voice is calm and even. He is right in Loki's face. "Are you *sure* there is only one joker."

Loki's eyes flit towards the three other soldiers standing in his cramped kitchen. Three big armed men plus Black.

"Yes sir," he says. "I'm sure."

Black stands back. "Strip search him."

Loki hardly has time to react before Black's men are on him. There's no point in resisting. He allows them to remove his sweater, t-shirt, jeans, socks, underwear, everything, until Loki is standing buck naked in his kitchen in front of Black and his men.

"Check every seam of his clothes," a distant voice says. "This one is slippery. Like an eel...."

Loki squeezes his eyes shut and retreats into the box in his mind, far away from what is being inflicted upon him. He goes away, as he always does, until the invasive hands on him feel far away, like all this is only happening in a dream. His real self is tucked deep inside where no one can hurt him or degrade him. However bad this gets, it will pass. It always passes. He's survived this before. It's just his body, and his body is a shell. All he has to do is weather the storm. He won't cry. He won't cry.

Loki hears a strangled whimper and he knows it came from his own lips. He hates that it's Sunny's calm reassuring voice playing in his head:

You're okay, Lokes. Everything's okay.

The men finish their search. Their hands move away from Loki's flesh, and Loki comes back to himself at once. He wraps his arms around himself to ward off the chill.

"Nothing, sir," concludes one of the soldiers.

"It's got to be here," hisses Black. "He's hiding it somewhere. Check again."

"Sir, the place has been swept to protocol."

Black turns back to Loki. "Where is it, Loki. Where's the other joker."

"I told you," Loki says, quiet but fierce, "There is only *one* joker."

In one smooth motion Black flips the kitchen table, sending the neatly sorted cards flying. He gets right up into Loki's face.

"You're goddamn lucky you're Red's bitch, because if you were anyone else's, I would've had you back on that boat before you could cry out for your mummy. But I swear to God, if I find out you've fucked me, I will make damn sure Duntsch's never gonna get you. Do you hear me? You'll be begging for the Rig after what I will do to you. *Nobody* fucks Lucius Black."

Black backs up and politely puts his emptied mug in the sink, as if the rest of the cabin hadn't just been completely trashed and Loki isn't standing there naked amongst his ripped-off clothes.

“Well, kiddo. Thanks for the coffee. You best be cleanin’ up before Red gets home. Wouldn’t want him stumblin’ in on this mess and thinkin’ you ain’t a good housekeeper.” He signals to his men, and they file out of the cabin. Black likewise turns to leave. “And for God’s sakes, do me a favour and at least blow him once in a goddamn while. I didn’t bring you back for you two to live in abstinence. Jesus.”

The door slams closed. Loki crouches down, hyperventilating, and forces himself to take several deep gulps of air. With violently trembling hands he fishes his puffer out of his discarded jeans pocket and takes several puffs on it; the exhale comes out as a sob.

Once he’s calmed down somewhat, he reaches up to a nearby drawer and pulls out an old ratty notebook he’d found in the cellar. He rips out a single page and begins to rewrite the contents of the playing card, letter by letter, which he had stayed up to memorize the night before.

And, as he’d likewise done with the original message on the playing card, he takes his written-out message, sets it aflame with Thor’s lighter, and watches it burn until it’s nothing but cinders.

Loki recites the letters in his head over and over as he does his menial laundry tasks. He makes a little song to help him remember and sings it to himself under his breath. It’s strange, but he feels oddly....vindicated by Black’s visit. If Moo’s card was nonsense, why would Black go through the trouble of coming to look for it? Moo *had* to know something about all this - about the Rig and its purpose. The two of them are linked somehow - the compass points to each of them when Loki is near enough. Moo was trying to help him, Loki is more certain of it than ever. Just because Thor didn’t know what to make of his card, doesn’t mean it’s useless.

What Loki *does* doubt is his memorization. Moo’s note wasn’t terribly long, but the words and their meaning meant nothing to him, even when he tried sounding them out. Moreover, parts of Moo’s writing were practically illegible. Loki is sure he probably misread certain letters. Worse, Loki knows he sometimes mixes up letters. He prays he didn’t make too many transcription errors.

Each day before and after work Loki rewrites the message on a single blank notebook page (ripped out of the notebook so as not to leave indentations) to see it all down at once. Loki’s not used to writing - he knows how to draw pretty good, but he’d never really been taught to hold a pencil - so his own handwriting is almost worse than Moo’s. But he has to keep Moo’s message fresh in his mind. He cannot forget. After he’s satisfied he still has it memorized, Loki burns the paper, as he’d done to every copy he’d ever produced. He never tells Thor about Black’s search. He’s too humiliated and ashamed. Besides, it would only upset Thor, and it’s not like Thor could do anything about it anyway.

Loki buries that traumatic experience, along with countless others, deep in the recesses of his mind. He refuses to dwell on it. The important thing is he still has Moo’s message. That feels like a victory in and of itself, like he’s beaten Black somehow. That maybe, stupid and uneducated and illiterate as he is, he’s managed to outsmart the Compound’s chief intelligence officer.

And so, Loki settles back into the drudgery of everyday Compound life. The days are short and the nights are long, cold, and dark, but at least the laundry is warm. Most of the work to be done is mind-numbingly tedious. Loki is always the first to volunteer to collect or deliver laundry. This also affords him a chance to at least say hi to Sigryn at the canteen, although it’s nearly impossible to get her to drop the subject of where he’d been over Christmas.

“Oh! I never gave you your Christmas present,” she exclaims. “I’m sorry. I baked you some Christmas cookies, but I think Green got drunk and ate ‘em all. I’ll give you some pierogies instead

if you like.”

Loki smiles. “Thanks.”

She leans forward and gives him a quick peck on the cheek. She whispers in his ear, “The pill took. It’s finished.” Her face is appreciative, but sad. “Thank you again.”

“Sure,” says Loki, and he’s sad for her too.

He’s still reciting his letters as he’s gathering sheets in the south wing of the barracks dormitory.

"Loki. Hey. *Hey!*"

Loki swallows down his groan when he sees who’s beetling towards him. It’s the same soldier who’d watched him trip over his groceries after that first big snowfall. Loki doesn’t know his real name, but people around here call him Spud because apparently he’d once eaten an entire bag of raw potatoes on a dare. He looks about sixteen, but Loki knows they’re approximately the same age.

“Hey, Spud,” Loki mutters.

“Where’ve you been? Hardly seen you around here lately. Didja have a nice Christmas?”

“It was swell,” answers Loki as he strips another bed of its sheets and throws it in his growing pile. “Truly magical.”

"Cool, cool. So - uh. Listen. I was wondering if you'd changed yer mind? About the fifty credits?"

"I'm really not in the mood for this right now."

"Would *sixty* credits get you in the mood?"

"Please, Spud," Loki says, breathy. "I'm married."

"*C'mooooon*. What’s the problem? The other girls do it. Sixty credits is a lot."

"I'm not like other girls," Loki retorts, silky and dripping with sarcasm. He continues in a bored tone: "Go to the brothel if you want to get your dick wet. It’s cheaper there anyway."

“I don’t wanna catch anything.”

That pisses Loki off. He whirls around.

“Where do you think all those diseases come from, anyway? Who do you think gives ‘em to us? Hmm? Do we give *ourselves* gonorrhea? Chlamydia? For the sheer fun of it? Trust me, there’s nothing *fun* about trying to convince some whiney entitled prick like you to wear a condom and keep it on."

Spud puts his hands up. “Hey, chill. Sorry. Didn’t mean nothin’ by it. I just like you, is all.”

“I’m as disease-ridden as they come, so go bother someone else. I ain’t interested.”

Spud lets out an indignant huff. "Well, maybe I should start pointin’ out how much time you've been spendin' alone with Green's woman."

“So?”

"Sooooo, we've all seen you two - real chummy-like. Can look suspicious to outside observers. I bet Greeny doesn't like it. Bet ol' Red doesn't like it either."

"Sigryn's my *friend*."

"Yeah. Sigryn's been a lot of guys' friend around here."

Loki gathers the last of the bedsheets under his arms. "Fuck off."

"Hey, I'm speaking to you! I'm a soldier!"

"And I'm the queen of Egypt," Loki calls over his shoulder. "I said, fuck off."

"You'll be sorry!"

"Hey Thor," Loki says that night, as he and Thor are lying in bed side by side.

"Yeah."

"You know I'm gay, right?"

"Oh." Thor clears his throat. "Uh - ahem. I guess I just assumed..."

"Well, I am," Loki says firmly. "I just want you to know that in case you start to hear rumors about me and Sigryn. She's my friend - that's all. Most of my friends have been girls. Because most people like me are girls. I haven't been with a girl sexually. I mean - I guess I sorta have, but not because I was attracted to her or anything. More like, we were working together."

Loki winces at himself in the darkness. He wishes he hadn't added that last part.

"Okay," is all Thor says.

"I like men," Loki says aloud. "I've always liked men."

Loki wants to stop there, but he feels compelled to keep going. Oddly, feels he owes it to Moo. Moo maimed himself on purpose to give Loki a shot at being sent back home to Thor; Loki is sure of it. Moo knew, deep in that malformed skull, that he was the reason Loki was being kept prisoner, and he castrated himself so that Loki would have no further purpose at the Big House. Moo was trying to help him. Moo wanted Loki to have his happy ending - just like in his movies.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I've liked men," Loki goes on. He hazards a glance at Thor. "Um, what do you think about that."

"I dunno. It's just how you are. It doesn't bother me, if that's what you're asking."

Loki takes a deep fortifying breath. "What if I told you I knew I was gay because of you."

"What? *Me*?"

Loki forces it out: "I had a bit of a crush on you growing up."

Thor laughs uncomfortably. Or maybe incredulously.

"That's...wow. Uh, okay then."

This isn't exactly the reaction Loki was expecting - or hoping for.

"What's *wow*."

"Nothing! Nothing. I guess - I dunno. Weren't we kinda like brothers?"

"No. We weren't," Loki says flatly. "You said so yourself."

"Sorry. I'm not trying to be a dick. I'm just surprised, is all." Thor pauses. "*You had a crush on me?*"

"Listen - never mind. The point is, I'm not fooling around with Sigryn. I wanted to tell you first in case you start hearing stuff about us. She's my friend. She's helped me a lot since I first came here. I dunno what I would've done without her."

Thor is quiet. Too quiet. It makes Loki anxious.

"Couldja say something?"

"It's just - I mean - why me? I was such a dick to you."

Loki looks at him narrowly. "You really don't remember, do you."

"Remember what."

"The summer before your senior year of high school."

"What about it?"

Loki still can't bring himself to reveal anything specific. He's becoming more and more unsure of his own memory of Mr. Bee and the events that transpired over the summer of '82. Loki needs his story to be corroborated by Thor's independent testimony. He *needs* Thor to remember on his own without Loki putting words in his mouth. Sunny always made him doubt himself. Sunny made him feel like he was overexaggerating. Loki truly doesn't think he made this story up; he remembers the day he and Thor went for ice cream as though it were yesterday. But maybe he did fabricate it? Maybe he concocted this whole rescue-story out of thin air to give him some kind of connection with Thor that wouldn't have otherwise existed? Why else would Thor not remember any of this at all?

"D'you remember anything unusual about it?" Loki prods. "We hung out all summer. You and me."

"We did?" Thor looks pleasantly surprised. "Huh. That's nice."

Loki could throttle him. He sits up.

"*What's wrong with you?* Why don't you remember me? What was it about me that made me so damn forgettable?"

Thor blinks up at him. "It's not like we were close, Loki."

"I guess we fucking weren't! Thanks for clarifying!"

Loki throws himself back down into bed and rolls over away from Thor in a huff.

There's a long silence, and then Loki feels Thor's hand curled on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Loki. I had no idea you felt that way. I didn't mean to upset you."

Loki merely sniffs.

"Mostly I remember you as being really quiet. You hardly spoke to me. You only ever talked to your mom, seemed like."

"I was scared of you," Loki says, which is also the truth, despite his raging crush.

"Yeah," Thor acknowledges. "I was an asshole. Still am. It didn't have anything to do with you; I just didn't like having to share the house. And, it's gross to think of your parent having sex. Gross for me, anyway, I'm not as used to it...as...uh..." His voice tapers off. "Alls I mean to say, is, I know we weren't close growing up, but....we can be close now. If you want."

Loki peers over his shoulder. Thor's got his arms open, as if in invitation. He seems nervous but oddly hopeful. This is new territory for them both. They've only ever slept side by side.

Loki doesn't even think. He surrenders himself to Thor's embrace at once, the way he's wanted to since he was a child, when he was sleeping in Thor's room. It's unreal to experience being held by him at last. Pressed tightly against Thor's warm body, with the prickle of his stubble against Loki's forehead, their legs intertwined, his strong arms wrapped protectively around him - it feels better than Loki ever imagined. In this attitude, Loki can hear Thor's heartbeat, can feel the steady rise and fall of his chest with every breath. Here, Loki is warm and cherished. Here, Loki is safe.

Thor might not remember, but it's okay. At least Loki has this. Here and now, Loki has this.

New years eve, 1996.

The Compound is abuzz with excitement in the days leading up to the party. As Loki makes his laundry deliveries, he takes stock of the laborers' progress as they set up the pyre for the big bonfire. This seems like a weird place to host a party.

"I'd call it more of a controlled burn than a party," Thor explains, when Loki asks. "For everyone to let off some pent-up steam. Of which there is lots."

"Isn't it kinda cold to have a party outdoors?"

"If there's gonna be free booze, then there's gonna be a party," Thor says.

Loki cooks dinner as usual that night - a large, bone-in ham, which apparently Black had given to every Commander for the occasion. It's a decent hunk of meat and Loki's glad to have it, despite its provenance. Later in the night, around nine PM, music from the sound system starts to blare, heralding the party's commencement. Loki can hear it pulse through his cabin's walls.

Loki doesn't really want to show, but he's too curious to see what the hubbub is about to stay in. And so, sometime after ten, he and Thor bundle up and make their way outside. Scattered around the Compound yard are oil drums lit on fire, around which soldiers and laborers are already mingling and drinking from styrofoam cups. Packs of girls are dancing by the speakers. But the centerpiece of the party is the great bonfire, whose scale and luminosity is utterly awesome in the otherwise pitch black night. It dominates the entire centre of the yard, and its flames lick up far above the roofline of the surrounding buildings.

It looks like everyone really did come out for this, despite the cold - the soldiers, the laborers, the

wives, the brothel workers, although a few guards appear to still be on duty to keep the peace. A pack of mangy-looking kids are kicking around a beat-up old soccer ball in the snow. It strikes Loki that the Compound isn't unlike a small town, with its petty dramas and social hierarchy and customs. Everyone here has a place and a purpose. Like a weird little community of sorts.

He's never really been out in public together with Thor like this, although presumably everyone knows by now they're something of a couple. Thor doesn't seem bothered by being seen with him, which is nice. Still, Loki wishes Thor would hold his hand or something. Maybe that's too much to ask of him.

"Loki! Happy New Year!" Sigryn slurs, having come up to greet them. In each mittened hand is a styrofoam cup full of a steaming amber liquid. "Hey Red, sir. Happy New Year."

"Happy New year to you too, Sigryn. How's the cider?"

"Pretty good sir, the best batch yet - not fucking terrible! Strong though. They knew better than to skimp on the whiskey this year." She staggers on her feet, and her drink sloshes in its cup. "Oop, fuck. That's hot. Sir, lemme just say, I'm real glad you got yer teeth fixed. Tooth pain is *the worst*. I don't mind the gaps. Honestly, I think it's kinda charming. Ya still look good. Loki thinks so."

"*Sigryn*," Loki hisses.

She looks at him. "What. You do."

"Thanks Sigryn," Thor says. "Uh, where's the line for the cider start?"

"Down yonder, sir." Sigryn gestures. "Oh, and they're serving hot bread pudding with cream out of the canteen, so go have yerselves some before it's gone because trust me you won't be getting anything good outta there for the rest of the year."

And so, he and Thor make their way to the cider line and wait a few minutes to be served up. Thor is right - the cold isn't so bad between the bonfire and surrounding flaming oil drums and the steaming hot cider, although Loki's feet are basically ice cubes in his boots.

Sigryn finds them again not long thereafter, having broken away from the circle of women.

"Come dance with us."

Loki looks to Thor, uncertain, but Thor merely makes a shrugging *be my guest* kind of gesture, so Loki allows himself to be tugged away to join the brothel workers and Compound wives, most of whom Loki now recognizes or knows by name. They seem to be the only ones really dancing - if you could call it that. Loki feels self-conscious at first; he never liked it when Sunny made him dance. But this is different. The brothel workers aren't trying to titillate; they look more like a mob of raving wild banshees. Any wayward soldier looking to cop a feel or join in on their fun is mercilessly beaten back and mocked for his penis size or sexual performance.

"Pay to play," they screech.

Loki relaxes and starts to let loose and enjoy himself. He feels safe amongst the women. He feels safer around women in general, but these women in particular are not ones to be trifled with. They're all tough, like Sigryn. Scrappy. You'd have to be, to survive here. The weak ones don't last.

"At least they know how to throw a party," Sigryn screams at him over the pulsing techno music. "Midsummer is better, not so fucking cold."

"I'm gonna puke," Loki shouts back.

"Fucking puke, then, fuck this place. It ain't a New Year's party if the yard ain't covered in puke after."

Loki scans the yard to look for Thor. He spots him off on the sidelines, but he isn't alone - Black is now with him, and the two of them appear to be chatting. Black happens to lock eyes with Loki at that precise moment and has the audacity to wink at him. And Loki *hates* him. Hates him more than Duntsch; hates him more than Sunny. Maybe even more than White herself, although it's a tough call.

"I think I wanna take five," he shouts at Sigryn.

"What? Why? Are you really gonna puke?" She follows Loki's line of sight. "Here, let's just go over here."

She takes Loki by the elbow and guides him to the other side of the bonfire, out of Black's line of sight.

"Better?"

Loki is breathing hard. He feels faint all of a sudden. He retrieves his inhaler from his jacket and takes a puff on it. His eyes are watering, and not just from the bonfire smoke.

"You okay?"

"I hate him. I hate him so much," Loki wheezes on the exhale. He hates how riled up he feels just from Black's single wink. He hates how powerless it makes him feel. He hates being cooped up in this wretched place, where he cannot escape neither Black's surveillance nor his mockery. He hates that Thor is working for him - all for Loki's sake.

Sigryn takes Loki's hand in her own mittened hand. "Don't let him get to ya. Black's time is coming. Mamma says so."

What does Mamma know about anything, Loki wants to bite back.

"Here," Sigryn says. "Let me teach you a curse."

*Black Black he's on the Rack
His bones are weak and brittle,
And when he's bare, girls laugh and stare,
His cock is small and shrivelled!*

*Black Black he has been snapped
In half and half again,
To Hell he goes, his reign deposed
And there he will remain!*

*Black Black licks Satan's crack
The taste he comes to crave,
And as his tongue laps up the dung
He'll rest sound in his grave!*

They chant this back and forth until Loki knows it as well as she does. It feels safe to do this because they're positioned right by the blaring speakers, such that the thumping music drowns out

their voices even when they're yelling mere inches from each other. The rhyme soon becomes incoherent, devolving into raucous laughter as they spin around. Sigryn is screaming. Loki is screaming too, but not in the way he'd done with Mamma. This time it's more like a deranged, wild, gleeful roar.

"Fuck Black," he shouts at her.

"Fuck Black," Sigryn shouts back, laughing shrilly. She looks like a force of nature. She bares her teeth, hyena-like. Loki does the same back at her.

Fuck Black. Fuck White. Fuck Duntsch.

Fuck Mr Bee. Fuck Daddy Werner. Fuck Mad Dog. Fuck every single john who never stopped to question what this underage kid was doing hooking on the pier. Fuck every single man who has ever watched his video tapes.

Fuck Sunny Day.

Afterwards, Loki's ears are ringing so bad it's making him dizzy. He staggers away, needing a break, and finds Thor on the other side of the yard. He's alone now, staring blankly into space, a cigarette dangling from his limp hand, his face half-lit by a blazing oil drum. He looks so...solitary. It's like mood-whiplash. Loki suddenly feels extra sorry for him. As far as Loki can tell, Thor has no friends here, no circle of support - nothing like the tight-knit little community the sex workers have created for themselves. The Commanders can't be friends with the soldiers in their units, nor with the common laborers. Nor do they especially seem to like each other. Thor must've been so lonely for so long. No wonder he was glad to have Jane, even if their relationship was somewhat tempestuous.

Thor comes-to as Loki approaches. He snuffs his cigarette under his boot, as if to preemptively avoid Loki berating him about the smoking. Loki wasn't going to - he's given up on trying to get Thor to quit - but he appreciates the gesture nonetheless.

"Hey," Thor says. "Having fun?"

"Yeah," Loki flashes his brightest, best smile. "It's a party all right. You having fun?"

"I'm having my yearly ration of fun, yeah."

"What did Black want?"

"He just wanted to wish us a Happy New Year. Check that everything's going okay. I thanked him for the ham."

Loki seethes inwardly, but he refuses to let his rage froth to the surface. He won't let Black ruin his good time - or Thor's.

He tugs on Thor's hand. "Come dance with me."

"Commanders don't dance," Thor tells him, "But you go ahead."

"Are you sure?"

"I like watching you enjoy yourself."

Loki shakes his head. "Nah. I'll stick with you for a bit. Let's get some of that pudding and warm

up."

Thor smiles. "Okay."

They make their way towards the canteen and take their place in line alongside all the others looking for dessert. The line moves quick, and within a few minutes they are both plated up with a bowlful of gooey looking bread pudding covered in warm cream. Loki has never really been in the dining hall before, aside from the odd glance in during his towel deliveries. It's about as shabby-looking as the rest of the Compound and has a strange musty smell, like a church basement. The floor is a sludgy mess from all the snow the revelers had tracked in. Loki does not envy the poor sucker who's gonna be mopping up all this crud tomorrow.

They find a seat side by side together in the dining hall. The bread pudding is by no means fancy but it is steaming hot and delicious. Thor meticulously picks every raisin out of his own serving and deposits them into Loki's bowl, without asking whether Loki even wanted them. Loki distantly remembers him doing this exact same thing with his mother's cinnamon buns - as if Thor knows, intuitively, that Loki will always eat his raisins. It's so odd to be with someone who at times feels like family, and at other times seems like a complete stranger.

"Uh, listen. There's been something I've been meaning to talk to you about," he says.

"Okay," says Loki.

Thor takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry for freaking you out about the whole fake-body thing." He laughs like this was just a silly passing notion he'd had. "Jane is dead. I know she's dead. Dunno what came over me that day. I wish I could've talked to her one last time - got some closure or something. That's probably why I reacted the way I did. I got a bit confused. But she is - dead. Jane is dead. I know that."

"Okay," says Loki again.

"I'm confused a lot lately. This place can really mess with you, and uh. My brain is kind of pickled from all the drugs and shit, or from having been hit on the head one too many times. The point is, I'm fucked up. Royally fucked up. I know it hurts you that I don't remember you, and for that I'm sorry. If it makes you feel better, I don't remember much in general, especially about my life before this place. It almost feels like my memories have been chipped away.... I want you to know that just cos I don't remember doesn't mean I didn't care about you growing up. I'm sure I was a dick most of the time but deep down I considered you and your mom as family."

Loki's voice is very quiet: "I know you cared, Thor."

"You do?"

Loki nods.

"Okay," Thor clears his throat. "Good. That's good."

"Can I ask you something then?" Loki ventures. "Did you ever think of me at all after you left home? Did you ever wonder where I was, or what I was doing?"

Thor makes an evasive, nondescript noise, and Loki turns back to his pudding with a glower.

"Never mind. Forget I asked."

"Sorry," Thor says, sheepish. "I guess I figured you and your mom were still with Odin. Like I

said, my brain's basically mashed potatoes...." he pauses. "Why, didja think about me?"

Every single day.

"Yeah," Loki says. He reflects briefly on Moo and forces himself to add: "I tried to find you."

"Really?" A little wistful smile crosses Thor's lips. "To give me my baseball back, hey?"

Loki is trying to concoct a response that isn't completely stalkerish when loud bangs go off outside and what sounds like gunshots.

"What's that?"

"Fireworks. Must be midnight," says Thor with a single cursory glance out the window. "Well. There it is. Happy New Year."

Loki feels like he needs to do *something*. It's New Year's after all. How many New Years had Loki spent wishing fervently to be able to kiss Thor at midnight? This time last year he was with Sunny working a party. God, there's a crazy thought. That seems like an entire lifetime ago. Loki recalls fleetingly thinking of Thor at midnight. If only he knew where he'd be one short year later...

Loki can only muster enough courage to press a quick kiss to Thor's stubbly cheek. "Happy New Year."

Thor looks startled. They've kissed before, but this feels different - laden - since now Thor knows the truth of Loki's sexual orientation, as well as about his childhood crush. Loki can't bring himself to reveal that his crush is still *ongoing*, however. Frankly he feels he shouldn't have to. He basically spelt it out with those twin admissions. Surely Thor has figured it out by now....?

"Never been kissed on New Year's before," Thor says, almost bashful.

"Never?"

"No."

Loki is scared to ask, but does so anyway: ".....What about Jane?"

"Jane never came out to these sorta things. Not really her scene. And she was pregnant this time last year, she was too tired to stay up past midnight anyway...." Thor's voice trails off, like he's trying to mask a swell of emotion, but then he shrugs and turns back to his pudding. "Besides, she didn't seem to fit in with the other girls. Not the way you do."

Loki can't help but feel vindicated by this - at least he's better than Jane at *something*. "Did she want to?"

"She certainly felt like she didn't have a lot in common with them. Which to be fair - she really didn't. I was pretty much the only person she ever talked to. And that's got to get boring, day in, day out."

"I don't think you're boring," Loki offers, making Thor snort.

"Thanks, but you'd be singing a different tune if you'd worked for years and years on a PhD in motherfuckin' astrophysics and you ended up stuck in a domestic living situation with a guy who nearly flunked outta high school. The stuff she was into - it was trippy shit. More like science fiction than real science. Singularities. Wormholes. Alternate universes. That shit'll fuck you right

up if you can wrap your head around it."

This gets Loki's attention. Alternate universes. Hadn't Duntch said something to that effect when he was blabbering on about bringing Loki's mother back?

"Are those kinds of things possible?" Loki asks.

"What kinda things."

"Alternate universes - timelines - whatever you wanna call it."

"You're asking me?" Thor's eyebrows raise, and he laughs. "Shit. I dunno."

"Did *Jane* think it was possible?"

"She probably would've called it theoretically possible. But *possible*-possible? Who fuckin' knows."

"Well, what did she say about it?"

"What did she say?" Thor echoes, clearly puzzled as to why Loki has suddenly developed such a keen interest in this. "I dunno. Lots of sciency shit I didn't understand at the time and don't really remember now. She used to get irritated when I'd ask her to explain something, especially if it was really basic to her, so I stopped trying."

Loki abandons this line of questioning since Thor doesn't appear to have any meaningful answers. Instead, he becomes angry at Jane for hurting Thor's feelings and making him feel dumb. Loki *hates* being made to feel dumb. How dare she treat Thor that way, when he was only trying to engage with her?

"She should've never taken you for granted," Loki says sourly.

Thor sets down his fork and turns towards Loki intently. "Let me explain something to you. When I first got Jane, I was young. Impulsive. I had all these grand ideas about what it would be like having a wife of my own. I thought I was doing her a favour by bringing her to live with me. I considered myself so much better than the other soldiers. But really I was just horny. Horny and stupid and impatient. I sabotaged our relationship from the get-go. If I'd only given her time to settle in and get used to me, maybe things would've been different. Maybe she wouldn't have ended up resenting me so much. But, as it is, let's just say I gave her plenty of reasons to hate me." Thor's voice becomes quiet. "I like to think we were working it out by the end though. For the sake of the baby."

This only pisses Loki off more. So Jane considered herself above transactional sex with the man who'd saved her from the Rig? A man who never hit her, never cheated on her, *and who looks as Thor does*? Pft. Loki's fucked worse men for much worse reasons.

"She was your kept woman, Thor. She owed you sex. You shouldn't feel bad for taking it."

Thor appears shocked by this at first - even horrified - but then his face softens, and he just looks sad. Sad for Loki.

"D'you really believe that?"

"That's kinda what being kept means," Loki says hotly. "It's just how it is."

"Do *you* feel like you owe me sex?"

"What I *feel* is irrelevant," Loki says, "But yes. Technically speaking, I owe you sex."

"So you're telling me, if I wanted to go home and fuck, you'd do it."

"You don't want to, though."

"Say I did. Right now. Would you do it."

A wave of nerves and excitement flares in Loki's stomach at the prospect - that maybe Thor might mean it this time.

"Course I would. I'd be happy to. I want you to feel good."

"And what about you?"

"What about me."

"What would make you feel good?"

Loki smiles thinly. He doesn't like having to consider his own wants and desires when it comes to sex. It's much too fraught. *Especially* in this case.

"What I like most straight men don't like. I wouldn't worry about it. There are lots of other things--"

"No, wait a minute. What don't straight men like?"

Loki feels flustered. "I don't expect you to do anything that would make you uncomfortable. I know you're not sexually attracted to men. That's all."

"So you'll do whatever to get me off? And then what? Roll over and go to sleep? Finish doing the dishes?" Thor falls silent as a few soldiers pass their table. He carries on in a hushed voice: "Has it occurred to you, Loki, that maybe I want my partner to enjoy it too? That maybe for once in my adult life, I'd like to have sex with someone who actually desires me and not cos I paid them or cos they felt they owed it to me?"

"I desire you," Loki says softly.

"No you don't! You *literally* just said you owed me!"

Loki kisses him again, right on Thor's dry, chapped lips, and he lingers there for just a few seconds.

"I desire you," Loki says again, after he pulls away. But this time, he says it as he'd always wanted to say it: like a soft caressing whisper and an ache. Loki's entire being desires Thor, every aspect of him; not just a bodily desire but an all-consuming one. Every atom in Loki's body calls out for Thor, as if a magnetic pull is what has led Loki back to Thor after twelve long painful years apart.

Thor is looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face. Loki knows he'd been staring. He takes a chance and scoots a bit closer. He lays his hand on Thor's thigh under the table. The firm muscle goes taut under his fingertips, but Thor doesn't shake him off or pull away from his touch.

"What if we did go home," Loki says, husky and breathy and rich. "Right now. You can just close your eyes...relax. You'll be in good hands, I promise. Let me take care of you. *Let me make you feel*

desired."

Thor visibly swallows. His cheeks pink.

"I'm not sure I'm ready," he says at last, and very gently lifts Loki's hand off his crotch. "I'm not saying no, just - can I think about it?"

Loki sits back in his seat and tries not to feel utterly rejected.

"Yeah. Course."

Thor stands up awkwardly and adjusts his clothes. "I'm going home to use the bathroom," he announces, probably because they can be reasonably certain their private bathroom is cleaner than the canteen's. "I'll meet you back outside, kay? By the bonfire."

"Okay," sighs Loki, and Thor scuttles off. Loki sits there, pulls his inhaler out and takes a puff on it. At least Thor didn't turn him down outright.

After he finishes his pudding, he heads back outside into the cold to wait. But who catches up with him first isn't Thor, and it isn't Sigryn, either.

"Well well well look who it is. Hey Loki."

It's Green. He swaggers over in a manner that indicates he's already partaken heavily of the spiked cider.

"Saw you out there dancing with Sigryn earlier," he says. "Looked like you two were having fun."

"It's a party, sir," Loki answers.

"Sure is. Sure is. Hey - I been meaning to ask - you remember how you called yerself a fag?"

Loki flinches. He wishes he hadn't used that word. He corrects: "Yes sir. I'm gay."

"Y'know, that's interesting, cos one of my guys, he says he coulda sworn he's seen you in a porno before he came here. A porno with another woman."

"He must be confusing me with someone else," Loki mumbles.

"Does the name Maja Heart means anything to you?"

It takes everything in Loki to keep his face neutral. Maja Heart - Maja *Hensen* - was one of Sunny's girls. A girl whom Sunny often paired Loki with to work threesomes, especially when he wanted Loki to act more like a t-girl than a boy. Sunny was sick that way; anything to make a buck.

Loki had pleaded with Maja to run with him. She didn't.

"No sir. Doesn't ring a bell."

"So you're saying my guy was lying to me."

"No sir, I just said he's confusing me with someone else."

"Then maybe you'd care to lift up your coat and show us your lower back?" Green goads. "C'mon, show it off. You ain't hidin' anything interesting back there, are ya? No distinctive tattoos or nothin'?"

Loki eyes widen, caught, and Greens' face lights up with glee.

"A-ha! So that *was* you! Red's got a bona fide porn star at home! Wait'll everyone hears about *this*!"

"Please sir, I'm trying to move past that part of my life. I never wanted to do it. I was forced."

"You want me to feel bad for you? Keep your little secret? Cry me a fucking river, whore. Every single person in this godforsaken hellhole has a tragic backstory. You don't see me whining about what happened to me. But at least I keep my hands off other soldiers' wives."

"Sigryn and I are friends," Loki says calmly. "She's like my sister."

"Brothers fuck their sisters all the time. *Especially* in porn. You should know, right? So, how 'bout it. Have you fucked a woman or not?" He gets up close and uses his index finger to jab Loki in the chest for emphasis: "Have you ever - got your little pecker hard - and put it in a woman. Yes or no."

It's then that Thor shows up. Loki is extremely glad to see him.

"Hey. Red, sir." Loki says, and latches on to his arm at once. "I'm feeling kind of tired. Can you take me home?Now?"

The urgency in Loki's voice does not go unnoticed. Thor looks between Loki and Green.

"What's going on."

"Oh, nothing," Green says, nonchalant, "Just having a lil chat with your boy here. He's led a fascinating life, y'know. Had some very interesting experiences."

"You ain't got no business with him. You can talk to me, Green."

"Okay, you wanna talk? Let's talk. Let's talk about how your boy's been fuckin' around with my wife."

"I'm sure that he's not."

"Is he telling you that? Bet he would. The girls let him into the brothel for free. They like him there. The cock in the henhouse. I wouldn't fuck it up either, if I were him."

To Loki's horror, this seems to give Thor pause. He turns to peer at him with narrowed eyes.

"Green. What the ever loving *fuck*," Sigryn shrieks, elbowing her way past the gathering onlookers.

Green shoves her back, hard enough that Sigryn stumbles. "You stay out of this."

"Hey," Thor barks. "Chill, man."

"Open your eyes, Red. We all know he's tricking on the side. Making credits at the Big House and the brothel and doing God knows what else. You hear me, slut? I see you. Stay away from my girl!"

"*Fight!*" shouts an onlooker.

"Green," Thor warns. "Back off."

"Fair is fair, Red. You've fucked my wife. Do I get a turn with yours?"

What happens next is a blur, but it's definitely Thor who starts it. It's like something inside Thor simply snaps. He charges Green like a bull and the two men begin throwing punches, some of which land, some of which are dodged or parried. Green is at least as trained in combat as Thor is, but he's sloppier - certainly more drunk. Loki is paralyzed with shock, not just at what he's seeing but how quickly the situation escalated. All he can do is cup his hands over his mouth to stop himself from screaming Thor's real name.

"Oop, looks like we've got ourselves a good ol' fashioned yard-brawl!" Blacks shouts over the frenzied crowd. "Give 'em space! It's a party!"

It's like watching a pit of rabid animals, the way the party devolves after that. The surrounding soldiers and laborers all circle around to start cheering and goading them on - not just men but a few women too. They're all starved of entertainment, bloodthirsty, and probably somewhat desensitized to violence. Not that the two fighters pay the crowd any heed at all, so immersed are they in their scuffle.

At some point, Green stumbles, and Thor's got him on the sludgy, churned up ground. That's when Thor starts to really beat the living shit out of him.

Sigryn is sobbing at Black's side. "Sir, stop this, please. Stop this."

"Now, now, darlin', the menfolk are just workin' out their differences," Black says, with one hand fisted in Sigryn's hood to keep her in place. He doesn't even look at her, so entranced is he by the spectacle. "Just a bit of healthy sport. It's all in fun."

It doesn't at all look like fun. It looks like Thor is hardly even human. But now that Green's on the ground, Thor becomes controlled in his violence, not rushed or frantic, but almost with a single-minded, methodical determination. He pummels Green over and over. He's not going to stop until this is finished.

Black is laughing.

"Okay, boys, break it up. I think Green's had enough."

It takes four grown soldiers to pry a seething, snarling Thor off Green's unconscious body. Thor grunts and storms off in the direction of their cabin without looking back. The crowd parts like the Red Sea to allow him plenty of berth.

Sigryn throws herself down by Green's broken, bleeding body and cries out hysterically for help. The crowd disperses, having lost interest. It's Loki and a few of the other brothel girls who help Sigryn get Green's limp body back to their cabin.

"He just had to rock the fucking boat," Sigryn says, later, after the doctor had left. She and Loki are sitting at her kitchen table sipping tea from mismatched mugs, although Sigryn hadn't yet touched hers. Loki's never seen anyone sober up faster. "Fuckin' had to go and be a big man and shit. I *told him* not to buy into those rumors! Pfft. Serves him right. I'm glad he got his ass beat. He deserved it, for talking to you like that."

Loki knows she's lying. He's never seen her look so deeply shaken; her eyes are red and her face is blotchy from crying. She cares for Green, in a weird combative kind of way, although she'd never come out and say it. Watching him nearly get pounded to death - by *Thor* - has them both feeling

disturbed and unsettled. Loki could have never imagined Thor being capable of that level of pure unbridled ferocity. By the looks of it, neither could Sigryn.

"I am so, so sorry Sigryn," Loki says, for probably the twentieth time.

She shakes her head. "It's got nothing to do with you. He's been acting weird lately. Not his usual self." She glances towards their bedroom, to where Green is still out cold. The doctor had bandaged up his face, but blood from his broken nose has since seeped through the bandages. He gurgles as he breathes, loud enough that they can hear him from the kitchen. "It's hard to describe. I adjusted my spells, but I must've made the last one too strong. He had a bad reaction. Made him all jealous and paranoid and shit. At least that's what I think it was.....that's what I hope it was...." She chews her lip. "He's not a bad person, deep down. Really he's not. I'm so sorry, Loki. I'll try to keep him under control."

"He's not gonna hurt you over me, is he?"

"Not if he wants laxatives in his food," she says with a derisive snort. "I'll be fine. I can handle him. I just need to recalibrate my spell, is all. I'll have to consult Mamma about it. Still - this kinda stuff spooks me. He's usually way more manageable than this. If Green went and got his dumb ass killed, I dunno what I'd do with myself...."

"Yeah," Loki agrees. He knows this fear all too well. Every kept sex worker does.

Sigryn turns to him sadly. "I think I need to stop seeing you, Loki. Until I figure this out. I don't wanna get you in trouble. I don't want to get in trouble either."

She touches her forehead to his.

"Bright Blessings."

Loki enters his cabin sometimes in the wee hours of the early morning.

"Hey."

Thor is a goddamn mess. He's sitting at their table, holding that same bag of frozen peas to his face that he'd used after his dental surgery. Loki has resigned himself to never getting to eat those, given how many times they'd been thawed and frozen and then rethawed again.

"The doctor says Green's got a concussion. He should be okay with a bit of rest."

Thor just glowers and takes another swig from the glass in front of him. He's changed out of his muddy fight-clothes, but he still has smears of dirt on his face and hands. He has a feral air about him - a charged, crackling electric energy. Loki proceeds with caution:

"Listen. I'm grateful you stood up for me, really I am..."

"But...?"

"But..." Loki's voice trails off as he loses steam. "No buts. Just be careful."

"I'm careful. I can fight."

Clearly, Loki thinks as he eyes Thor's darkening shiner. Green definitely landed his share of blows.

"That's just it, though. You two couldda really hurt each other."

Thor readjusts the bag of peas on his face. "That's kinda the point of a fight, yeah."

"You knocked Green out. He's got a head injury. You broke his nose and two teeth."

"He should've known better than to pick a fight with me. And anyway, since when d'you care about Green's wellbeing? He had it out for you."

"Green can lay down and die for all I care. But he's Sigryn's husband. She needs him like I need you. What if you'd cracked his skull open? Then Sigryn's *fucked*."

"So you're saying you'd've rather I let him kick your ass."

"What I'm saying is you didn't have to get in a goddamn brawl! You two went at it like wild animals! Would you've kept going if Black hadn't called you off? Now Sigryn owes the doctor credits for looking at him and she can't afford it."

"Then she should've done a better job of keeping him at home," Thor says, sullen, and very much like the moody teenager Loki once knew.

"Look. I appreciate you standing up for me. Really I do. But I need you to understand what it's like to be someone like Sigryn or me. Our livelihoods - our lives - depend on our soldiers. I need you, yeah? That's why it's scary to watch you do stupid shit that could get you hurt!"

"You don't have to worry about what'll happen if something happens to me. You'll be okay. If I drop dead tomorrow, you'll be okay."

Thor says this because he thinks Loki's got a ticket out of the Compound, but Loki knows better. Black will never send him to Duntsch. No; after Loki's use here has run its course, Black's going to ship him straight to the Rig, Loki is certain of it.

"Has it crossed your mind that maybe I don't want to leave? That maybe I want to be here with you? I hate seeing you be so...."

"So what."

"Out of control," Loki finishes carefully, because he doesn't think he can say *vicious*.

"I was *not* about to let Green disrespect me like that in front of everyone. And I'm not going to be disrespected by you either. This is my house and you have no right to question what I do in here or anywhere else."

Loki looks away to mask his eye roll. Under his breath he mutters, "Okay, Odin."

Thor's eyes narrow. "What did you just say?"

"I said you sound like your father," Loki says, loud and clear, looking Thor right in his blackening eye. "Oh, don't make that face at me. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as they say. I should know; people have said it about *me* all my life!"

"I am *nothing* like Odin."

"Oh please. Anything short of slavish bootlicking is considered *disrespect* by you people. I'm so over it. I get it, you're the boss. You supply my room and board and I just have to suck it up and be a good house-bitch. Right? Wouldn't wanna get slapped with the ol' disrespect label. Or even

better! *Difficult*. That word always made me fall into line. You might not remember this because you don't remember shit, but you suuuure didn't like it when Odin pulled that kind of authoritarian bullshit with you. *My house my rules? Like it or leave it?* Does any of that ring a bell to you? He treated us all as if we were his army unit and he was the sergeant. You hated it so much you ran off in the night and never came back. Now imagine that's how you have to live your life every day forever!"

"I don't give a shit what you say or do in private but outside it's different!"

"Why is it different? Let me guess. Because I'm a boy. Because you don't want to look weak in front of everyone. Just admit it - you're embarrassed you've got me instead of a girl. Is your precious masculinity threatened?"

"Maybe it is! I don't know what I'm doing with you! I don't know what this is!" Thor gestures between the two of them. "You don't hear what people say but I do. People think I'm some pushover now. They say I'm pussy-whipped."

"Excuse me."

"You heard me. Cos everybody heard you backtalk me out in the yard. It's one thing to have a boy at home but another to let him steamroll you. I *told you* you can't be seen defying me in public! Now everyone says you're tricking behind my back. And they're right. You *are* tricking on me. I know you fucked someone important on your little mystery trips to the Big House."

"Yeah - to fix your teeth, you absolute prick!"

"So he admits it!" Thor shouts. "Hallelujah, he finally fucking admits it. Tell me, Loki - who was it? Who did you fuck? Was it Boss White? *Did you fuck Boss White?*"

Boss White's a woman, Loki wants to scream.

"Fine! You know what? I *did* fuck Boss White. There, I said it. Are you happy?"

The lie springs forth without any forethought, but it has its intended effect. Thor is stunned into silence. Evidently he wasn't expecting Loki to actually come out and say it. It feels good to shut him up, and Loki can't resist embellishing: "Yeah. He fucked me good and hard. He *reeeeally* made me work for your teeth, let me tell ya. He made sure to get his money's worth out of me."

Thor's eyes are wide. "He - he hurt you?"

"No more than most," Loki sniffs. "I'm tough, though, I've been through worse. I could handle it."

Thor soaks this in silently. Then he cocks his head and asks, "What does Boss White look like?"

Loki falters, for just one second. "He's - y'know. Got dark hair. And a bit of an accent. I wasn't supposed to look him in the eye - being the trash that I am and whatnot. Each time it was from behind."

"How old is he?"

"He's...I dunno. In his forties? It was dark, hard to see..."

The lie starts to fizzle out. Thor isn't buying it, and Loki capitulates in a huff.

"Look. I'd tell you what I did at the Big House if I could. But I can't. And I won't. So please stop

asking me about it. Okay? It doesn't matter anymore. They won't be wanting me back, I promise you. I'm useless to them now. Even Black said so."

"Is what you do at the brothel secret too?"

Now it's Loki's turn to fall silent. Thor laughs bitterly.

"Yeah. Thought so. That's why they say you can't trust a sex worker with shit. Either they steal from you or trick behind your back. This is exactly the kind of shady shit that makes us not want to marry you people. Maybe Odin had the right idea after all. Always used to wonder why he never married your mom but now I see why."

Loki's mouth hangs open, deeply hurt and stupefied that Thor, his noble brother, his childhood hero, would say something so profoundly....cruel.

"Who *are* you?"

"I'm **Red**," Thor answers simply. "Commander **Red**."

"Oh, fuck off. You're Thor Odinson."

"That's not my name. Not anymore. I told you, I'm **Red**. There is no one else but **Red**. You *wanted* Thor, but you got me." Red grins, displaying his missing teeth. "You want me anyway, though. You must be a real masochist."

"Thor, stop it. That's not funny."

"My name is **Red**. My name is **Red**. Say it."

He gets up and stalks towards Loki, but Loki moves in such a way as to keep the entirety of their kitchen table as a barrier between them. When he moves clockwise, Loki moves clockwise. When he switches directions, Loki does the same.

"You're avoiding me now?"

Loki's mouth feels so dry. "I just think....you're not being yourself."

Thor makes a face as if Loki had said something profoundly naive, even precious.

"That's where you're wrong, Loki. I've never *been* more myself. This *is* who I really am. It's not my fault you think I'm someone I'm not." He makes a jerking motion - a false start - then laughs when Loki also startles. "Are you scared?"

Loki looks him over. Thor's a big man. He's overpowered Loki before - easily. Loki always believed Thor would never purposefully hurt him....but then again, he never pictured Thor as capable of hurting anyone, let alone the way he went at Green.

"Yes."

"Don't be. There's nothing I could do to you that you wouldn't like. Right? You'd do anything to make me happy. You said so yourself."

"I'd do anything for *Thor*," Loki confirms.

Thor's face turns to steel. In a flat, commanding tone he says, "Why don't you come over here."

"Why don't you go for a walk and cool off," Loki says carefully. "When you come back we'll sit down and talk. Okay? I'll tell you everything. I promise."

"I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you."

Loki's heart is thumping like a jackhammer. He's at a loss; if he turned his back to make a dash for the front door, he would almost certainly be apprehended. There just isn't enough space in here for Loki to have any kind of head start.

"What're you gonna do," Loki asks.

"I haven't decided yet," Thor answers. His fingertips caress the surface of the table between them idly, as if to remind Loki that he could easily just flip it. "You did say you *owed* me, didn't you?" He smiles again, that same strange, unnerving gap-toothed smile. "C'mere Runt. Why dontcha come give your big brother a kiss."

"Thor please," Loki whimpers. "This isn't you."

"How many times do I hafta tell you? I'm ~~REDREDREDE/REDED/~~

In a sudden burst of energy, he lunges, his face contorted into an ugly snarl. Loki doesn't even think. He grabs a bottle that had been sitting on their counter and smashes it right over Thor's forehead. Thor drops like a stone against the far wall, dazed and dripping with cheap whiskey. A single trickle of blood seeps from his nostril. Except it's not red like blood. It looks black. Black like molasses.

Thor dabs at the substance dripping from his nose with his fingertips and then looks at the smear. He mutters a muddled, incoherent apology and staggers past Loki to the bathroom, slams the door closed, and locks it behind him. Loki is left standing in his kitchen amongst shards of broken glass, still clutching the neck of the shattered whiskey bottle in one white-knuckled fist.

Thor comes out much, much later. He pads into bed and lays down next to Loki. Neither of them say anything for a long time.

"That scientist guy Black mentioned...D'you know him?"

"Yeah," croaks Loki. "I know him."

"Was he kind to you?"

"I mean - I guess."

Another long pause. "I think you should go with him."

Loki looks at him sharply. "I'm not leaving you."

"It would be better for you if you did." Thor's words are stilted. He keeps his gaze stubbornly affixed to the ceiling. "I'm finding it harder and harder to.....control myself, these days."

Loki feels his eyes burn hot. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm sick," Thor says ruefully. "Real sick. I reckon I don't have much time left."

"Time left for what?"

"Until I'm gone."

"Gone? Gone where? Where are you going?"

Thor doesn't answer and Loki starts to really freak out. He shakes Thor's shoulder violently.
"*Would you fucking answer me for once?*"

Thor merely looks away, this time to the far wall. "I'm going to tell Black to take you to that scientist. The next I see him."

"Don't," Loki pleads. "Don't. Please. I want to stay. If I left you behind I would regret it for the rest of my life."

"There's nothing to feel bad about. It would be a load off my mind to know that you were somewhere better, somewhere safe. I'd be happy for you, really I would. You ain't obliged to stay with me. You shouldn't feel you have to. I'm never going to escape this place. Even if I ran, it'll be a part of me forever. But you - you still got a shot. *You have to get out of here.*"

"I can't leave you," Loki whispers.

"Loki, I -" Thor visibly swallows. "I'm going to end up hurting you if you stay."

"I know you wouldn't. You're not like that," Loki says harriedly, although after tonight he isn't so sure.

Thor clearly doesn't believe it either. His eyes are so sad, so tired.

"You know how you say I don't remember you? That I don't know anything about you? Well, you don't know the first thing about me either. I'd rather you left before something bad happened. Something....worse than tonight. I'd want your last memories of me to be nice ones."

"Then make nice memories with me first. Don't send me away."

"My mind's made up. I'm talking to Black." Thor's voice is soft and vulnerable. "Please don't hate me."

Loki barges into the brothel's back door in a state of hysterics. The girls there are still awake from the party and allow him entry without any fuss; they recognize him too by now. They fetch Mamma for him at once.

"I'm sorry. I know it's basically morning and everyone must be tired. But don't know who to turn to. I need help. It's Red - he's not himself. Something is wrong with him. Please. Help me. I'm losing him. He's sick. He's scaring me. He's going to try and send me away. I can't leave him. I can't-"

"Hush, Loki," Mamma says. "Take a deep breath. Explain to me what happened. Start from the beginning."

Loki had intended to only recount tonight's events, but once he starts he finds he can't shut up. He tells her everything - starting right from the beginning point: his childhood with Thor, and of course what happened with Mr. Bee. He rambles on and on and on, probably incoherently. He jumps backwards and forwards in time mid-sentence. He has the wherewithal to stop himself from revealing what he'd done at the Big House, thankfully, but that is about the only information he is

able to withhold.

“My child, my child, you never told me your love for him was so strong,” Mamma says, awed, after Loki has finished. “That changes *everything*.”

“I don’t have any credits to pay-”

“No matter. I am obliged to help you. You will be a great catalyst of change here, in ways that are yet beyond my powers of discernment. Besides, how could I refuse a heart that loves as truly and as purely as yours?”

Loki has no idea what the hell she means by that, and he is too wound up to really care.

“So you’ll help me? D’you know what’s wrong with him?”

“I have my suspicions,” she says carefully, “But I must make an in-person assessment before I can proceed. We will do it tomorrow evening. What time does Red get home at night?”

“Around eight, usually.”

“Very good. I will come at seven-fifteen to prepare. Oh and Loki - What was your mother's name?”

“Frigga,” Loki says, unsure what that has to do with anything.

“Frigga,” Mamma says, as if tasting the word. She smiles. “Rest in glory.”

She arrives right on time the following evening, bundled up in a pilled, drab shawl.

“Evening.” She smiles at him cheerily. “Are you ready?”

Loki doesn’t know what it is he’s supposed to be ready for, but he’s coming to accept that Mamma always talks in riddles and ambiguities.

“Thanks for coming,” he says, but before he allows her entry he leans forward and whispers, “Um, just so you know, our cabin is bugged.”

This tidbit of information doesn’t seem to faze her whatsoever. “Mm yes,” she says, pensive. “That shouldn’t be too much of an issue for our purposes here tonight. But thank you for telling me.”

“And uh. Red can sometimes be a bit...testy...”

“Oh, I’ve dealt with plenty of testy men in my time,” Mamma chuckles with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I know how to handle these *Commanders*. Just follow my lead.”

“No, you don’t understand. I don’t want to trigger another... episode.”

With firm conviction, as to leave no room for doubt, she takes Loki’s face in her hands, looks him dead in the eye and says, “I am your earthly mother now. I will not allow anyone or anything to bring you harm.”

What this woman in her sixties could do to fend off any man, let alone a trained soldier like Thor, Loki doesn't know, but he decides he trusts her anyways and stands aside. Mamma moves to enter, but she stops in her tracks on the threshold as if she’d hit a physical wall.

“Uh, you can come in.”

“Yes,” she says distantly. “Thank you.” She steps inside at last and takes off her boots and her shawl. She hangs the latter on the nearby wall hook.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“I do not yet know. When the moment comes, the path forward will be made clear. Would you mind if I looked around?”

Loki shrugs and nods at once. It’s not like she could possibly be any more invasive than Black was. And so, Mamma enters and begins moseying around aimlessly, stopping here and there to inspect and touch random objects - drinking cups in his sink, Thor’s tuque on the wall hook, the coffee, flour and sugar tins on his counter. Sometimes she picks them up, sometimes not.

“You still have that compass I gave you?” she asks.

“Yeah. It’s been....helpful.”

Of course Loki can’t tell her that the compass had pointed to Moo when he was at the Big House, just as it points to the Rig when Loki is here in the Compound. It’s one more bit evidence linking the two; one more piece of this strange puzzle, and Loki is glad to have it.

Thankfully, she does not ask him to elaborate. “Good, good,” she hums.

She ambles into their bedroom and runs her hands over the quilt on their bed, then peers at Loki, who has trailed in after her. “You and Red aren’t having sex.”

Loki has no idea how she could tell that just from touching his blankets.

“Uh....yeah.”

“Hm. Shame. He is a strikingly handsome man. My girls always liked when he came calling.”

Loki chews his lip. “What did they say about him? About what he’s like. In bed.”

She looks at him like she can see right through him. “You’re asking me to reveal a Commander’s sexual proclivities?” she says, scandalized, then her face softens into a wry little smile. “He prefers ass over tits, if that makes you feel better.”

It does, a little.

“I’m afraid I have no tawdry secrets to report. Not on your Red anyway; he was always gentle with my girls to my knowledge.” She leans forward and whispers, barely a breath, into Loki’s ear: “He’s been down on them before.”

For whatever reason, this sends a shiver of arousal down Loki’s spine.

She pulls away and her face is perturbed. “Which is why his current state weighs heavily on my mind. It would be a tragedy to lose him. He has a kind heart.”

Loki nods. It’s validating to hear her say that, since that is something Loki has always likewise believed, despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

Mamma pats his shoulder. “Take heart. Sexuality is more fluid than people think. And love - why, love is the strongest force in the universe. Stronger than gravity, than time and space.”

With that, she exits the bedroom and returns to the kitchen.

“Which is the chair Red usually sits in?”

Loki points. “That one.”

“Be a dear and hold it upside down for me, I have a bad back.” She retrieves a little jar from deep within her skirts and unscrews it, revealing that the inner side of the jar's lid has a small brush built into it. She then sets about painting a sigil under Thor's chair with what must be alkanet paste. Afterwards, they tip the chair back on its legs.

"Now what," Loki asks anxiously.

"We wait."

Thor comes in some time after eight and halts in his tracks at seeing the brothel's madam in his kitchen. The spooked look on his face indicates that he knows precisely who she is.

"Good evening, Commander," Mamma says pleasantly, as if she doesn't notice. "Happy New Year."

“Uh, hi -"

"Margit," Mamma finishes with a nod of her head. “From the brothel. But you can call me Mamma if you like. Everyone does."

"Margit's fine," Thor says. He looks like he wants nothing more than to extract himself from the situation, to turn around and march right back out the door. But he's got nowhere to go at this time of night, and it would appear rude to leave right after he'd come home, ostensibly because Loki's hosting a guest. So he stays put, as their cabin is too small for him to retreat anywhere.

“Can I get you somethin' to eat?" Loki asks as he rises from his chair. “I can heat some leftover stew..."

“Sure," Thor says, and allows Loki to take his coat. “Uh, thanks."

“Loki has invited me over for some tea and to pray for his mother," Mamma explains, preemptively, before Thor can ask. “It's the anniversary of her death."

It's not - his mother died in the late summer - but Loki doesn't say so. He keeps busy getting the stew going in a saucepan.

“Oh," says Thor. "I'm - uh, sorry to hear that."

“He tells me you knew her? Your father and his mother were intimate?"

Thor's frown deepens into a grimace. “Something like that."

"Perhaps you would share a prayer with us."

Thor outright balks. “I'm not really sure that's my kinda thing-"

“It would mean a lot to us both if you would join us," Mamma says, taking Thor's hand in hers for emphasis. “Loki especially. You are one of the remaining few who knew his mother when she was alive. Your participation is vital for preserving her memory. It won't take long. Just while you wait for your dinner. Then I will leave."

"Please, Red?" Loki adds softly.

Together, he and Mamma manage to pull Thor down into his designated sigil-chair. Thor goes, albeit stiffly.

"Thank you Commander," Mamma says with genuine graciousness once Thor is fully seated. "Loki my dear, you sit right there, on the opposite side of me." She likewise produces a small candle from somewhere deep within her skirts, places it in the middle of the table, and lights it with a lighter. "Now, let us clasp hands...."

Loki reaches across the table to take Thor's free hand, such that the three of them are now holding hands in a circle around the table. Mamma's hand is warm and soft; Thor's is cold and clammy from having just been outside.

"Frigga, mother of Loki. Hear our call. Blessings on your son, Loki, and on your lover's son..."

She pauses and looks over at Thor expectantly. Thor stares back at her.

"What."

"Your name, Commander."

Thor's face is cold and flat. "My name is Red."

Mamma just smiles. Her eyes glitter. "Your *real* name."

Loki ducks his head. His and Thor's weird altercation is still very fresh in his mind, and the direction this is taking is already making his heart pound. No one *ever* asks a Commander their real name. Sigryn doesn't even know Green's real name. The only reason Loki knows Thor's is because of their prior history together.

Predictably, Thor bristles. "That's none of your business," he says icily, but Mamma does not so much as flinch. Her grip on Loki's hand is steadfast and reassuring.

"Peace, Commander. I meant no offense. Your mother who carried you in her womb, laboured to give you life and nursed you from her own breast gave you a name and it would honour her for you to say it."

The strangeness of this statement appears to stupefy Thor. Mamma's got him pinned to his chair by the intensity of her stare, like he's been rendered immobile. Paralyzed and speechless.

"Commander," Mamma says, level, yet with undeniable force, such that each syllable lands like a shockwave. "What did your mother name you."

"Thor."

"*Thor!*" Mamma exclaims it like a revelation. She casts off her intense scrutiny as easily as one might bat away a fly. She beams as she looks between them. "Loki and Thor. Thor and Loki," she chants, sing-song, and strangely knowing. She starts her invocation over: "Blessings on your son, Loki, and on your lover's son Thor. We gather here tonight in celebration of your memory and to wish you peace in the next life. I also give you thanks for the gift of your own flesh - the product of your maternal sacrifice: Loki, your son, whom you loved in life and whom you love still."

Loki didn't think she was gonna go in this direction. His face feels hot. He kind of wants Mamma to stop, but he doesn't think he can back out of....whatever it is that she's doing.

"Would you say something about Loki's mother, Thor?" Mamma asks.

Thor looks started at being addressed at all - let alone by his real name.

"Oh. Um? She was a nice lady."

"What would you say to her if she were here."

Thor shifts in his chair, making it groan. "I dunno-"

"Thor, please. For Loki. It's important."

"I guess I'd say...She was a really good cook. Best meatloaf I've ever had. I've always said so. Haven't I said so, Loki?"

"You can do better than that," Mamma chides. "Come now. What would you say to Frigga, the woman who loved you and helped raise you?"

Thor makes a face. "She didn't *love* me."

"Yes. She did," Loki interjects. "She did, Thor."

Thor may not remember that stuff about Mr. Bee, but Loki is all but certain his mother did, even though they never talked about it in the years prior to her death. Her affection towards Thor is the only substantial corroborating evidence Loki has to prove that what happened with Mr. Bee was real. Why else would she have felt so warmly towards Thor, if not for what he did to protect her son?

Thor starts over: "I'm sorry I was a dick to her growing up-"

"Say it as if she were here," Mamma says. "Address her as if she were in this room with us right now."

Thor exhales audibly. "I'm sorry I was a dick to you growing up. Mostly I was resentful of my dad. Him and me had a lot of bad blood between us. It would've been the same for any girlfriend he brought home. It had nothing to do with you."

"Ah, but is that entirely true?" Mamma asks without a lick of heat - a gentle yet genuine challenge. "Or were you also resentful of the fact that she was a sex worker? Were you embarrassed by what she was, by what other people thought of your blended family?"

"Yeah," Thor says sheepishly. "I guess you could say that."

Mamma nods. "Go on."

"And uh. Thanks for taking care of my dad when I wasn't there to do it. I'm sorry he wasn't able to leave you any money. "

"What would you say to her about her son."

Thor's eyes flit to Loki's. "I guess I'd say....Loki is brave. He's had to endure a lot, and he's suffered a lot. But despite that he's still a good person. He sees the best in people, even when those people don't deserve it. I think you'd be proud of him."

Loki starts to cry. Sob. He wishes he could hide his face, but he can't with Thor and Mamma holding his hands like this, so his tears and snot drip messily down his cheeks and lips for all to

see. Thor *really* looks like he wants to flee now, but Mamma just clutches their hands tighter to keep them both in place.

"Don't break hands. Shhh. It's okay. Let him cry. It's okay. We will witness his grief and be present."

Mamma begins to sing a melancholy, haunting tune in a foreign language which Loki does not even recognize, let alone understand. Her voice is surprisingly clear and bird-like for all the screaming she seems to do around here. Loki manages to rein in his tears, if only to hear her better. Mamma sings as if her whole soul is pouring out, as if she is tapping into a font of deep, primal mourning. And something is happening - the hairs on the back of Loki's neck stand on end. At first he thinks it's because of the beauty of her voice, but no - it feels almost like a strange energy coursing through their hands. Loki thinks he's imagining it, but then he hazards a glance at Thor, and Thor looks...freaked out.

The candle flickers. The stew is burning on the stovetop, but nobody budes an inch.

Afterwards, Mamma fetches her shawl and wraps it around her shoulders. She doesn't say a single thing, and neither do they. Before she leaves, she kisses Loki square on the lips, right in front of Thor, who is watching her leerily.

As she pulls away, her eyes are as dark and as deep as interstellar space.

"Bright Blessings, Loki."

"It's worse than I feared," Mamma says, back at the brothel, some hours later in the dead of night. "I am sorry, my child, but it appears his sickness is quite advanced."

"What sickness?" Loki croaks. His voice is still raw from crying. He's kind of annoyed that Mamma always seems to set out to make him cry like that - and that she's so good at it. "What's wrong with him?"

Mamma's face is grave. "He's got Tar."

"Tar? What do you mean, *tar*? From smoking?"

"Rig-Tar," Mamma clarifies. "I can exorcise him, but it's too far along for me to do it alone. I must call upon the assistance of my daughters. Together we will perform a purge to remove the blockage."

Loki's head is spinning. "I'm sorry - what? What're you gonna do?"

"A purge. I am unsure the format it will take just yet. That is why I must begin preparations immediately, for any eventuality. January eighth is the next new moon - six days hence. We will do it then. In the meantime, keep sweet and do not provoke him. If he begins to frighten you again, come to me at once. Do not tarry."

"But - what if he tries to get Black to send me away?"

"We must pray that that does not happen," Mamma answers. "Now. If you please. It is late. I must consult my oracles."

She moves to usher him out, but Loki digs in his heels. He has a million more questions, but first

amongst them is this:

“Wait, that stuff with my mom.....did you make that up?”

She cups Loki’s cheek with her soft, warm hand. "I had to make sure she would find Thor worthy of you. And she does.....” Her eyes twinkle, esoteric, before they harden to concrete: ”But first we must do away with Red."

Chapter End Notes

[Mamma's song :\)\)\)\)\)\)](#)

If you liked this work, please please leave me a comment!!! It's the main reason I write. I'm not looking for any money; I don't have a patreon. I'm only out here trying to create something people might enjoy. So if you let me know that you enjoyed it, I will feel very rich indeed <3 I WILL reply to your comment, however sometimes it takes me a hot minute to get to everyone :)

My twitter handle is @teresalifts

Much love!

seven of nine

Chapter Notes

y'all thought this was fucked up before? lmaoooooooo children. Welcome to my drug trip.

yes, i know, i keep adding new chapters. Nine is the FINAL CHAPTER COUNT. There will be NO MORE chapters after chapter nine.

[who are you when i'm not looking?](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, Thor goes on assignment.

It could not come at a worse time. Loki is at once paranoid that Black found out about this *purge* thing Mamma's gonna do, and that he had Thor sent away on purpose to thwart their plans.

"Black should be unaware," Mamma says, when Loki goes to her in a fit. "The only way he could know is if these rooms were bugged, and I am quite certain they are not. No men are allowed down here uninvited. Certainly none of Black's goons. They wouldn't admit it, but they fear our curses."

Loki doesn't know what these women's curses could possibly do against Black's soldiers and guns, but nonetheless, Loki has no doubt they can speak in confidence in the brothel basement. The women guard this place like a pack of lionesses.

"Besides," Mamma goes on, "If Black knew and wanted to stop me - and he *would* stop me if he knew - he would've used more drastic measures than merely sending Thor away."

"What if Thor doesn't come home in time. What if we miss the new moon."

"We will perform the purge whenever Thor gets back - with or without the aid of the new moon. I do not think we can afford to wait."

This only distresses Loki further, so Mamma appends:

"Would it make you feel better to sleep here tonight?"

"I have to be home in case Thor comes back," Loki says. It comes out sounding like a pathetic childish whine.

"Shall I come and stay with you then? If you do not wish to be alone. I can give you something to help you sleep..."

This is how Loki winds up in his own cabin in bed with Mamma, with her spooning him from behind. Fully clothed; nothing untoward. Mamma rubs his back in soft soothing circles as she hums a quiet tune.

"I don't usually find myself in bed with women," Loki jokes, lamely, to distract from how weird

this is.

“Shall I leave?”

“No,” Loki answers quickly. “No, I’m glad you’re here. Thank you for staying with me.”

And he is - glad she’s here. Her hand on his back is comforting and her presence makes Loki feel safe. Soon he even forgets to feel weird about this. Maybe it’s because the pill Mamma had given him is taking effect. It’s making his head fuzzy.

“Mamma?”

“Yes, my child.”

“I’m really scared.”

“Yes,” she acknowledges. “Everyone is scared sometimes.”

“Even you?”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

“I feel like I’ve been scared since I was thirteen years old,” Loki says with a little shaky laugh, to soften the harsh truth of that statement. Because it’s true. He doesn’t think he’s slept soundly since the day he and his mom left Odin’s house behind for good.

“Hush. Now is not the time for troublesome thoughts. You must rest.” She pets his hair. “Let us speak of something else. Here, let me tell you a story.”

Once upon a time, in a golden kingdom in the sky, there lived two young princes. The elder, radiant as the sun, charming and beloved by all; the younger, luminous as the moon, cunning and skilled in sorcery. Though they often quarreled, as brothers often do, never did their love for each other wane....

Loki’s eyelids droop. Numbness creeps into his limbs and a pleasant fog settles over his mind. He feels at once lighter and heavier, and he nestles deeper into the mattress. He doesn’t feel afraid anymore. He doesn’t feel anything at all. All he is cognizant of, all that matters, is the soothing lull of Mamma’s raspy voice:

And together they went on many incredible adventures.

The following night, Thor is still gone. Loki learns that Blue is gone too, as well as the new Grey, which means in all likelihood they are, in fact, on assignment. Loki is too proud to ask Mamma to sleep over again, even though he secretly wants her to. He knows he isn’t the only one seeking her comfort and wisdom, and a part of him feels guilty for eating up so much of her time. Still, it would be nice to drift into sleep to the sound of another story. Loki really liked the one she told about the princes, although he’d missed how it ended.

The cabin wall phone rings that night as Loki is getting ready for bed. The sound of it makes Loki startle; he nearly trips over his feet in his rush to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hi - uh, Loki?” comes a voice that definitely isn’t Thor’s. “This is Albert.”

“Who?”

“Uh, Dr. Duntsch.”

“Oh,” says Loki. Then, angrily, “What do you want.”

“I’m just calling to see how you’re doing.” A pause. “How are you.”

“Fine,” Loki says. “Everything is fine.”

“That’s good, I’m glad.” Duntsch wheezes on the other line. “It is good to hear from you. I was so worried, after the incident...”

“You mean the incident where that crazy bitch shot poor Moo in the head and then ordered me shipped off to the Rig? *That* incident?”

Loki can almost hear Duntsch’s frown through the phone. “I know Boss White can be....mercurial at times, but she is a true innovatrix. The Rockefeller of our era.” He pauses. “I want you to know I don’t blame you for what happened.”

Loki is so tired and stressed that he starts to laugh.

“How kind of you to call and tell me that. That really puts my mind at ease. Ya know, I was really hoping to *apologize* to *you* for making your science project go and stab himself in the nuts while I was being held prisoner, resulting in your boss blowing his brains out. My bad.”

“All I mean, is, I don’t think you put him up to it,” Duntsch says. He sounds frustrated. “And it took some convincing to get White to see that, so maybe you *should* be thanking me.”

This shuts Loki up. He doesn’t doubt that that’s true, but he refuses to thank Duntsch for it.

Loki’s voice is flat. “What do you want. Really.”

“Well, if I could be frank....I was wondering how things are going with Red.”

“He’s fine,” Loki says. “Everything is fine.” He pauses, then adds slowly, “Why do you ask.”

Duntsch is quiet on the other line. “I think you know why I’m asking.”

"Is there a reason you think you should be asking?"

Duntsch sighs. "I'm asking because I'm concerned."

“Oh, *concerned*. Okay. Is there something...I dunno...concerning about him? Something I should know about?”

Loki pauses, waiting for Duntsch to say something. He doesn’t, and Loki gets pissed.

“Just say it. Red’s all fucked up with Rig-Tar. Right?”

“Loki-”

“No, you listen. What the fuck is that stuff? What’s it doing to him? I know you know, so don’t lie to me and tell me you don’t. *He’s only gonna slip further away from you*. That’s what you said. And it’s because of that - black shit - making him go crazy-”

“He’s a Rig Pig.”

Loki feels the floor drop out from under him.

“What?”

“He’s a Rig Pig. He always was. He will always be.”

“That’s - not possible. He’s - he’s never been out there. He’s told me so.”

“He would. Think that.”

A long silence follows.

“Loki?”

“I’m here,” Loki manages.

“I’m not trying to scare you, I’m just trying to make you understand. Every day you’re with him you’re in danger. Even Red knows it. That’s why he’s trying to have you relinquished to me. Yes, he’s already made several inquiries about having you removed from the Compound and placed in my care. Black has forbidden it for now, but I think soon he will relent. He will have no choice *but* to relent. Red will soon be too far gone to reason with.”

Loki feels his eyes well. “You have to help him. You have to do something-”

“There is nothing you or I could do for him. Nothing. The Tar will consume him. It is inevitable.”

Loki’s voice is a whisper. “What do I do.”

“Endure, for now,” soothes Duntsch. “Do not try and bring him back. Do not acknowledge his past self. It will only exacerbate his condition, and he may retaliate. The best thing for him is to let him go.”

Loki mops his face with his sleeve. He already knows he could never do that. He could never let Thor go.

“I want you to know I’ve gotten rid of the pornography,” Duntsch goes on, low and soft. “I destroyed it. I don’t want it. I want you. I can’t stop thinking about you, Loki. Our kiss - I’ve never felt anything like that before. I’m desperate to see you again. Loki, I love you. Let me give you my number. Okay? You can call me. You can - write - numbers?”

“Yes, I can write numbers,” Loki snaps. He hates himself as he says, “Let me get a pen.”

Duntsch calls him again the following night.

“I love fishing too. We’ll go out on nice days, right on the ocean. I have my own boat. We’ll catch and grill fresh fish for dinner - it’s wonderful in the summertime. Or, if you like. we can head into one of the cities, go shopping, try restaurants, see the sights...”

He keeps blathering on. Loki sits on the floor underneath his phone, knees to chest, toes curled inward as he clutches the receiver to his cheek, twirling the phone cord idly around his index finger. Loki listens because talking to men, hearing their empty promises, feels familiar. *Normal*. This isn’t some weird witchy shit that’s gonna do God knows what. Loki hates that he wants what

Duntsch is offering. As much as he likes Mamma, deep down, he isn't sure he believes she can really help him.

"Black's never gonna send me to you," Loki says miserably. "He hates me. He wants me dead. *Worse* than dead."

"I'll make sure you get to me," Duntsch says firmly. "Once I deliver on my contract, there will be nothing White won't grant me. Just focus on getting through the next little while with Red. It shouldn't be too much longer..."

Loki refuses to dwell on *why* Duntsch thinks it won't be much longer. It makes it hard to breathe.

"Did you mean what you said about my mom? About bringing her back? Please don't lie to me. Not about that."

A pause. "I don't blame you for being skeptical. That sounds quite impossible, doesn't it? The ramblings of a senile old man? Oh, Loki," Duntsch breathes, "You have *no idea* what's about to become possible. It will take time, but I promise I will do my best to get her back for you. You will have to trust me. You do - trust me?"

"Sure," Loki says, brokenly.

Duntsch's voice lowers a notch. "I still have your Christmas gifts here. I see that you opened most of them while I was asleep. Shame I didn't get to see you try on the other sets....You looked so lovely in the green."

"Yeah," says Loki. "Thanks."

"Did the fabric feel good against your nipples?"

"Excuse me?"

Another pause. Then Duntsch says it again: "Did the fabric feel good against your nipples?"

"I - I haveta go." Loki says quickly as he gets to his feet. "Goodbye."

Loki slams the phone receiver down, although he doesn't let go of it. Something stays his hand and keeps him from walking away. It's that little voice in his head. The one that's so blisteringly practical in situations such as these.

You can't afford to burn this bridge.

"Fuck!" Loki says aloud, to no one. The phone, maybe. The universe. He grits his teeth and redials the number. It rings twice before it's answered.

Duntsch's voice is cautious: "Hello?"

"It's me. Sorry - I had a moment there. Yes, it felt good. I liked it."

"Oh," says Duntsch, dumbly. "Uh - what did you like about it?"

"It felt soft - against my nipples." Loki cringes at himself, but his voice remains silky. "I felt pretty in it."

There's some shuffling on the other end of the phone. "What would you be doing if you were wearing it right now."

Loki exhales through his nose; ideally this won't take long. He zones out and starts talking. The voice that comes out of him doesn't at all sound like his own. He doesn't even recognize the words he's spewing. It's always variations on the same bullshit:

Mmm, yes. I like that.

Give it to me, Daddy. Give it to your girl.

Duntsch's crescendo of moans on the other end indicates when it's over. Loki's mouth snaps closed as easily as he'd opened it.

"You're such a good girl," Duntsch croons once he catches his breath. "Such a good girl for Daddy,"

Loki says nothing. He wants to take a shower.

"Can I call again? Tomorrow? Same time?"

"Sure," Loki says, defeated.

"Okay. Have a good night. Be safe. I love you."

"Yeah," Loki answers. "Good night."

Loki hangs up the receiver. Tears well in his eyes, even as he stubbornly rubs them away with his sleeve. Seems like these kinds of things shouldn't affect him - not after everything he's been through. But they do. They always do.

The phone rings again. Loki doesn't bother to hide how tired he sounds.

"What."

"Is that how you answer the phone? Manners."

It's Black.

"Oh. Um - hello sir. Sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Is that why I couldn't get through on the line? Jesus. I've been trying for fifteen minutes."

"I'm sorry, sir," Loki says again, quickly. He has the sudden humiliating thought that Black probably has his phone tapped, just as he's got his cabin bugged. "What can I do for you."

"Come get Red. He's here with me. He'll need some help getting home. We're at Central Block East, room four-twenty seven. I'll have my guys let you through."

Four-twenty seven, Central Block East. Loki mentally makes a note. "Thank you sir. Thank you. I'll be there in five-"

Black hangs up.

Loki is out of breath by the time he reaches Central Block East. Room four twenty-seven is something like a staff lounge room: there's a fridge, a counter with a sink, a microwave, a few tables and chairs scattered about. At the far end of the room is a couch, over which Thor is

slumped as if he had previously been sitting up. His head is resting on the couch's armrest and his face is veiled behind a cascade of ratty blond hair. His chest rises and falls in gentle pulses.

Black is there too, sitting at one of the tables with a corpulent officer Loki doesn't recognize. Another one of the Compound's admin, probably. Black is reclining. His jacket is open and he looks more unkempt than usual. He's puffing on a cigar and the room reeks of smoke.

"Hello Sir. Sir," Loki nods at each of them. He's antsy to get to Thor, but he feels he's not allowed - not he's given the go-ahead. "Can I come in?"

Black nods once, so Loki hustles inside. But before he's able to reach Thor, he's stopped by the officer sitting with Black.

"This Red's little magician?"

"That's him," says Black in an exhale of smoke.

"Oh, I've heard about you," The officer says. His beady eyes are bright as he gives Loki the once-over. "How about a trick, son?"

"I think Loki needs to take Red home," says Black.

"Red's fine. This'll only take a minute. Hold on - lemme find a deck-"

The officer takes off without further preamble, leaving Loki and Black alone. Loki really just wants to collect Thor and get the fuck out of here, but it looks like he'll have to play performing monkey first.

"Did you enjoy the New Year's party?" Black asks at last, very softly. He seems more subdued than usual. If Loki didn't know better, he'd say Black was high.

"Yes sir," says Loki. "It was fun."

"Nothin' like a party to break up the tedium around here," Black says, as if to himself. There's a strange undercurrent in his tone that Loki can't place. Almost.... bitter.

Loki refuses to give Black any ammunition, so he says nothing. He tries instead to focus on the rhythm of Thor's soft snores. But Black's gaze on him is distracting. It's making Loki's skin prickle.

"You ain't mad at me, are ya?"

Loki looks at him. "What?"

"About the search. Nothin' personal, you understand. It's all very routine."

"Sure," Loki says tightly. Then, to beat Black to the punch, he adds, "I take my clothes off all the time."

Loki expects Black to smirk or tack on some additional degrading remark, but no; Black merely stares at Loki from under heavy brows and allows those words to hang in the air like a miasma. Then, while never breaking eye contact, Black reclines in his chair and languidly allows his knees to fall open, the way that men do when they want to draw attention to themselves. He puffs once on his cigar, hollowing his cheeks. All the while, staring Loki right in the eye.

Loki breaks first and averts his gaze, neck hot.

“Well, I’m glad you ain’t mad.” Black says after a few minutes. His head is tipped back, having lolled against his chair, and his eyes are closed. His lips curl into a peculiar grin. “Would hate to have your little witch friends put a curse on me.”

Loki refuses to be intimidated. Of course Black knows about the coven.

“Maybe they have,” Loki says, feeling bold. “Maybe you *are* cursed.”

Black doesn’t even open his eyes. His grin fades to a wooden-looking smile.

“Yes,” he says at last. “Don’t I know it.”

It’s then that the officer triumphantly returns with a deck. He waves it in the air for emphasis.

“Found it! I knew I’d seen it here somewhere....”

He passes it to Loki and Loki accepts it without hesitation - mostly because he’s grateful for something to do besides engage with Black. He removes the cards from their box and executes a bit of trick shuffling. The officer watches, rapt, and participates in the trick when Loki prompts. When Loki makes the final swap, switching out a five of spades for a nine of diamonds, the officer makes a delighted squeal.

“Hey, he’s good!”

“Oh yes,” murmurs Black as he puffs on his cigar. “Loki makes all sorts of cards disappear.”

“Where’s a boy like you learn how to do magic, huh?”

“Around, sir,” Loki answers.

“Don’t suppose you’ll tell us how you did that?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets.” It takes everything in Loki to look Black in the eye as he says this. Black stares back at him with that same glazed, inscrutable expression, his cigar dangling from his fingertips.

The officer laughs.

“You’re spunky, ain’t cha,” he teases. “I like that. C’mon. Where’re you stashing cards.”

He grabs at Loki’s forearms to pull his sleeves up. When that produces nothing, he starts slipping his hands in Loki’s pockets, first in his coat, and then his front jeans pocket. Then he reaches behind into Loki’s back jeans pocket.

Loki curls away to escape the officer’s wandering hands. His voice is small. “Sir-”

“No touching,” comes Black’s dull voice. “He’s Red’s boy.”

“I don’t hear Red sayin’ nothin’.”

Black both sounds and looks bored. He inspects his cigar. “No touching.”

The officer backs off at once with an indifferent little chuckle, as if to indicate how little he cared to begin with.

“Lemme see you do that same trick again, then, hmm? Imma *really* watch you this time.”

“I think it’s time Loki took Red home,” says Black. “Go ahead, son. Get him up.”

Loki doesn’t need to be told twice, although he refuses to be grateful to Black for giving him an out. Loki discards the deck by tossing it on the table, hurries over to where Thor is still slumped over the couch and crouches down close to Thor’s face. He gives Thor’s shoulder a gentle shake. “Hey. Red, sir. Hey.”

Thor stirs, just barely, with a low throaty rumble. His eyes open a slit.

“Hey,” Loki smiles his best smile, although calling Thor by his Compound name is like bitter poison in his mouth. “Hey Red. It’s me. Want me to take ya home? Let me help you.”

Thor sits up groggily and rubs his eyes. He looks dazed, and he’s wobbly when Loki gets him to his feet. Loki has to sling one of Thor’s arms over his shoulder to get him up and moving.

“Oh and Loki?” Black calls before Loki can leave. He smiles, pointedly, and his dark eyes gleam. “Have fun with Red tonight.”

It’s a tough slog to get Thor home. He’s so sluggish that once there, Loki has to help him take off his coat and boots. As he does so, Loki can hear Thor’s stomach audibly growling. Loki plops him down at their kitchen table.

“Here. Are ya hungry? Want me to warm up some pierogies for you?”

Before Thor can answer, Loki proactively pulls out his frying pan, oil and spatula. He swirls a mix of pierogies, sliced ham and cabbage around in the pan until it’s all more or less cooked through, then plates up two ample helpings. But when he goes to serve Thor, he finds that Thor’s head is turned to one side, staring at the wall. Unmoving.

“Uh - Thor?”

Thor slowly pivots his head to look at him. The rest of his body does not move at all.

Loki sets his own plate down and slides Thor’s towards him. “Dinner’s on.”

Loki sits at the table and begins to eat. Thor looks down at the food as if he doesn’t know what to do with it.

"Aren't you hungry?"

Thor's eyebrows pinch. "Yes..."

“Why dontcha eat?”

"My teeth hurt," Thor says - not as a whine, nor even as a complaint. Just a sad statement of fact, like a child stating that they’re lost.

"Still?" Loki blinks. “We got the bad ones pulled...”

"They're all bad," Thor says, slumping deeper into his chair. “All of them.”

"Okay...." Loki’s voice trails off as he tries to think of what to do about that, given that there probably aren’t any more Moos around for him to blow in exchange for dental work. “Well, maybe wait for the food to cool down a bit first. Huh? Then it’ll go down easier.”

Loki is heartened when Thor starts to take a few tentative nibbles at the pierogi speared at the end of his fork. But he still seems to be distracted. He keeps turning to stare at the wall as if he could look through it. In horror, Loki realizes which direction he's facing. It's the same direction his compass points to.

"Maybe we should get you a nice shower. Okay? You'll feel better after."

"Okay," says Thor placidly.

Loki ushers Thor into the bathroom, hands him a worn but clean towel, and closes the door behind him. Within a few minutes he hears the shower water running, so he goes back into the kitchen to clean up. As he's putting away the dried dishes, it strikes Loki that Thor's been in there for a very long time. Long enough that there's certainly no more hot water left. It's not like Thor to linger in a cold shower.

Loki pads over to the bathroom door and raps on it with his knuckle. "Is everything okay in there?"

No response. Loki knocks again, louder.

"Do you need help? Thor?"

Still, no response. The only sound is the shower still running.

"Thor?" Loki swallows. "I'm gonna come in, 'kay?"

Loki slowly turns the knob and opens the door, giving Thor plenty of time to tell Loki to fuck off in case he hadn't heard him. But Thor doesn't. Instead, he just turns his head to look at Loki with that same spaced out, mildly uneasy expression as before. He's naked and the water is beating off him, catching in his matted, dirty hair, which he clearly hadn't washed or brushed. The shower door isn't even closed and there's water pooling on the floor. It seeps through Loki's socks, making Loki yelp. As Loki had predicted, the water is colder than ice.

"There's water everywhere!"

"I'm sorry," Thor says, and he sounds like it.

"No, you don't have to be sorry -" Loki says, frustrated. "Here, let me."

Loki reaches in to turn off the shower faucet, then grabs the towel off the hook and drapes it around Thor's shoulders. He rubs Thor down vigorously with it to warm him up, but Thor doesn't seem at all bothered by how cold his skin is. He merely stands there, dripping.

"Thank you for helping me." Then Thor says something that makes Loki's heart stop: "Have I seen you before?"

"We just ate dinner," Loki stammers. "You saw me a few days ago. At breakfast. We had scrambled eggs and toast. Remember?"

"No, not there." Thor goes very still. His eyes glaze over. "Somewhere else." His voice is monotone and slow, trance-like. "Where have I seen you?"

"Um, we lived together a long time ago? When we were kids? Is that what you mean?"

It's like Thor can't hear him. He turns to face that same direction, through their shower wall. "It's like trying to remember a dream..."

Loki realizes, with growing alarm, that Thor doesn't seem to know who he is. Worse, Loki doesn't know who *Thor* is either.

"I'm Loki. I'm your...I'm your roommate."

Thor turns to look at him, his mouth a firm, upset frown. "You're not supposed to be here. Jane is."

"Well, I can't help that," Loki snaps, before he can help himself. "I'm sorry I can't be Jane for you. I'm not Jane. Okay? I know you'd rather have Jane instead of me but you're stuck with me and you're gonna have to just deal with it." Loki's anger ebbs and his voice breaks. "I'm Loki. Don'tcha recognize me?"

"If you see her out there, could you tell her I'm sorry?"

"What? Out where? What are you talking about?"

"Please. It's really important. Tell her I'm sorry. Tell her....tell her I'll be with her soon."

"Sure," Loki says slowly. "I'll tell her."

Thor looks relieved, and grateful.

"You *do* know who I am," Loki prods. "Don't you?"

"You're Loki. I know you." Thor's eyes glaze over. "But not like this...."

Loki doesn't know how to deal with this right now. "Let's get you into bed, okay? I think you're tired. You'll feel better in the morning."

Like a child, Loki helps Thor finish drying off, then gets him into his sleep sweats and t-shirt. He guides Thor into their bedroom and settles him down in their bed. Loki lays down next to him and gathers Thor into his arms, which Thor allows complacently. Loki holds his freezing body for an indiscernible amount of time, petting his hair, trying his best to hold back tears.

Loki can tell when something in Thor shifts. Thor's breathing, once long and deep, becomes shallower, more like a pant through flared nostrils. Though Thor lies very very still, almost inhumanly still, his body is taut as a bowstring, vibrating with unspent energy. His eyes stare straight ahead, unblinking, unwavering. And Loki knows - *knows* - Thor is gone.

"I'm gonna step outside for some fresh air, okay?" Loki says very carefully. "Just one minute. One minute." He slowly extricates himself from Thor's limbs, peels himself out of bed, and begins to back up slowly towards the door. "One minute, and I'll be back," he says it again, as if he isn't going to fucking sprint to the safety of the brothel the second he's outside.

Thor sits up in bed.

"One minute, please," Loki holds his hand up just to put something between them. "Please just lie back down."

Thor doesn't. He gets up out of bed. He pads over to where Loki is standing, between him and the door, a monolith, effectively blocking Loki's only way out. Loki feels himself start to cry.

"What do you want? Do you want me to blow you? Or..."

Loki's voice peters off as Thor remains unresponsive. He just stands there in the darkness, a looming, hulking shadow, staring at Loki with dark, impenetrable, hyper-focused eyes.

“If you’d just tell me what you want to do, we can do it,” says Loki desperately. Sometimes it’s easier to let it happen and not fight back. “Huh? Whatever you want.”

All at once, Loki is accosted with a series of flashbacks. Suddenly he isn’t with Thor. He’s with a street-trick, in the man’s car, slowly realizing that he doesn’t know where this john is taking him.

Or, he’s with Mad Dog, about to get his ass beat because Mad Dog can’t get hard anymore thanks to all the steroid abuse - as if that’s somehow Loki’s fault.

Or, he’s with Rocco, on set, with Sunny behind the camera watching. Rocco whose dick made Loki’s eyes water. Rocco who got off on making Loki cry. Rocco who got famous for his rough anal scenes.

Thor’s eyes are just like theirs - unfeeling. Empty. Devoid of sympathy or...even humanity. Thor is going to tear him apart. No, not Thor. *Red*. And Loki’s heart can’t take it. He isn’t strong enough. He can’t withstand being hurt by this man - this *thing* - that wears Thor’s beautiful face.

“Scraps the cat,” Loki suddenly says, loud in the silence. “Scraps the cat. Our junkyard tabby mouser. Remember? She was feral. Hated anyone coming near her. You were determined, even though you got your forearms covered in scratches. You brought her treats until she let you pet her. Ham, bacon. You were so excited. So happy. She had kittens. One was a runt. You checked on it everyday. You always had a soft spot for runts....The runt died during a cold snap - Odin wouldn’t let you bring it inside - and I was so sad - sad for you, because you’d worked so hard to save it, and sad for Scraps, although honestly she probably didn’t notice. You buried it under the oak tree beyond the junkyard gate. After you left I had a funeral for it.”

Thor’s head cocks almost quizzically.

“And...baseball. D’you remember that? You were in the local youth league. Me and my mom and Odin came to watch your games. I cheered for you. You hated baseball, but you were pretty good at it. Odin made you do it. I remember...the other families not wanting to sit next to ours. But you let my mom hug you after. She was proud of you.”

Still, Thor doesn’t move, so Loki keeps blabbering:

“Your birthday is August eleventh. I remember cos it was always scorching hot and you would go to the swimming hole with your friends, and then come back with a sunburn. My mom sent me down there with a backpack full of snacks. Chips, cookies, sandwiches, soda. You were excited to see me - probably just because of the snacks - but I was so proud to have done something for you. I loved making you happy.

“One day, in the summer before your senior year of high school, you took me out for ice cream. Just you and me. We got in your car, rolled the windows down, and drove into town. You bought me a chocolate waffle cone with sprinkles. Three huge scoops - way more than I should’ve had, because I felt a bit sick afterwards. That was one of my happiest memories as a kid. Do you remember *why* you took me out that day? Do you remember how I slept at the foot of your bed that night, and every night that summer? Well, I remember. And ever since, whenever I felt scared, I’d imagine myself back there, at the foot of your bed. The only time I’ve ever felt safe was when I knew you were watching over me.”

"Your name is Thor," Loki finishes. "Thor wouldn't hurt me. Please don't forget. Please come back."

Thor says nothing; he does not acknowledge any of this, but nor does he move. With his heart in

his throat, Loki makes himself as flat as possible against the bedroom wall and carefully, carefully, carefully inches his way past Thor's hulking form, never moving too fast, but not tarrying either. Thor watches him slip by without comment or reaction. Only his head turns as he tracks Loki's progress.

Once past him, Loki hustles out of the bedroom, pausing to shut the bedroom door behind him. He then takes one of their kitchen chairs and wedges it under the bedroom door knob in such a way that'll hopefully jam the door closed.

Loki's boots are half on when the bedroom's door knob starts to wiggle.

"Oh please," Loki whimpers. "Oh no."

The wiggling turns to a *thunk*. Then again, *thunk*, growing in intensity. The chair goans under the strain. And Loki makes a break for it. He doesn't put on his coat; he doesn't close the cabin door behind him, he doesn't finish lacing his boots. He sprints in the direction of the brothel as fast as his legs will carry him.

Loki is only brave enough to turn around and look over his shoulder just as he's about to round a corner, well past the little village of cabins. Off in the distance, he can see Thor there, outside, on their cabin's front step, watching him go.

Loki sleeps with Mamma again that night. Her room at the brothel is small, windowless, and cluttered with shelves and shelves of knick knacks, none of which Loki pays any attention to. He drifts in and out of sleep fitfully; neither Mamma's stories nor her hand on his back is enough to calm him.

He goes to work at the laundry in the same clothes as the day before. The hours drag on and on, and not in the usual work-day kind of way. Loki's stomach is in knots. He's filled with a gnawing anxiety about tonight - the *purge*. Loki compulsively reaches into his pocket to clutch the vial Mamma had given him, as if it could convince him that this is all, in fact, really happening. Inside the vial is some kind of drug, and Loki has to get Thor to take it in preparation. He prays Thor has snapped out of...whatever fog comes over him. Because if he's still....*Red*....Loki has no idea what he'll do.

While ironing, Loki has a sudden realization: Duntsch had misled him. Duntsch specifically told him *not* to talk about Thor to Red, and that doing so might incite Red to violence. But in fact, it seems like reminiscing about their shared past is *precisely* what kept the flickering flame of Thor alive. How else could Loki have escaped past Red unscathed? Whether Duntsch lied to him about that outright, or if he was simply mistaken, Loki doesn't know. The jaded part of him suspects the former. After all, the sooner Thor is lost to Red, the sooner Duntsch expects to be able to claim him. Duntsch would likely do whatever he could to expedite the process, including giving Loki information he knew to be false. Loki wouldn't put it past him.

Armed with this knowledge (and a switchblade he'd borrowed from the brothel), Loki returns home to fix dinner. Come what may, Loki is determined to carry out tonight's purge. He's not ready to resign himself to being Duntsch's little sex slave. Not yet.

Still, that doesn't make the prospect of tonight any less terrifying.

When the cabin wall phone rings, Loki nearly jumps out of his skin. Loki exhales audibly; he'd forgotten Duntsch was gonna call. The last fucking thing he needs right now is having to cater to

that pervert's fantasies. He considers letting it ring out, but that little voice in his head compels him to answer it.

"Hello," he says as he picks up the receiver.

"Hi - Loki," comes Duntsch's voice. "How are you doing, sweetheart."

Loki inwardly seethes. *Did you lie to me, you sick fuck?*

"I can't really talk right now," Loki says instead. "Not a good time."

"Oh." Duntsch sounds disappointed. "I was hoping we could chat..."

Chat. He means more phone sex.

"Mm, not right now. Red could come home at any second."

"I understand," Duntsch says. "Uh, how is Red, by the way?"

"He's...." Loki's voice cracks. *Himself, I hope.* "He's.....I don't know."

"Are you safe?"

"I think so."

"Good, good," says Duntsch, though he doesn't sound convinced. To be fair - Loki was not at all convincing. "Well, it's reassuring to hear your voice. I worry about you, with him."

"I'm okay," Loki says, "But I don't think I can talk much longer."

"Maybe I'll try again later? After he's asleep?"

Loki hems. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"When would be a good time?"

"Uhhhh.." Loki racks his brain for an excuse. "The thing is, Red can get quite jealous...I don't want to risk it."

"I see," says Duntsch, and Loki can tell he's unhappy. It makes Loki anxious to have a man be unhappy with him - especially when it's a man whose help he may need later.

"But I'm really grateful you called," Loki forces himself to say in a velvety voice. "I'm lucky to have a daddy checking in on me and making sure I'm safe."

"Oh, well," preens Duntsch, easily mollified, "I do what I can for my girl."

"I'll call you when I get the chance. And we'll - we'll chat."

"Sure," says Duntsch. "That sounds good."

"I really do gotta go now though. I'll talk to you later, kay?"

"Goodnight babygirl," says Duntsch. "I love you."

"Yeah," Loki says. "You too."

Loki hangs up. It's only then that he becomes aware of the words that had just left his mouth. He didn't say it outright back to Duntsch, but he might as well have. Loki hates himself.

It's a good thing he'd cut the phone call short, because mere minutes later Thor comes home. Loki, already jittery, whirls around at once, heart in his throat.

"Hey," Loki says. It sounds like a squeak.

"Hey," Thor says in his normal voice as he takes off his boots and coat. There's nothing about his demeanor that appears outwardly abnormal, and Loki relaxes somewhat. But then, a new, more perturbing notion settles in its place: Thor doesn't comment at all on Loki's absence that morning, nor does he make any indication that anything out of the ordinary had transpired the night before. As far as Loki can tell, Thor thinks this is just a regular weeknight dinner.

Except it's not. Loki has drugged Thor's helping of stew with the vial of liquid Mamma had given him. He prays that it isn't perceptible in the food, and that the dose is enough to knock Thor out.

Thor tucks into his dinner without question. Loki almost feels bad for doing this to him again. Almost.

"So. How was your day?"

"Fine," Thor answers.

"What did you get up to?"

"You know I can't discuss my work, Loki."

This is his usual answer, which comes as no surprise. Thor has told him literally nothing of his day-to-day life at the Compound. Thor is gone at all hours, sometimes for days or weeks at a stretch, and Loki has no idea where he goes or what he does. Maybe *Thor* doesn't even know.

Maybe he is a Rig Pig.

Loki mashes his own dinner around in his bowl. He's too nervous to be hungry.

"So ah - funny thing about yesterday..."

Thor looks at him. "Yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"What's funny about yesterday?"

"What's funny." Loki feels like he's living in a surreal nightmare. "I picked you up from Black. You were kind of out of it. And I brought you home. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah," says Thor.

"You do?"

"Yeah..." Thor says again, as if wondering what Loki's point is. "So?"

"Well, I fed you dinner, and then we played that match of cards."

Thor stares at him for a few long seconds. So long, in fact, that Loki starts to become self-

conscious.

Except then Thor says, “And?”

“And...” Loki searches for something to say, although his mouth is suddenly quite dry. “And then I did that trick for you. But I fucked up real bad. I *never* fuck up tricks. Remember?”

“Oh yeah,” says Thor after a beat. He smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “That was funny.”

Guileless. By now Loki knows when Thor is lying, because he isn’t any good at it. When Thor wants to avoid discussing a topic, he’s more likely to deflect or refuse to answer than to outright lie. In this case, Thor is, as far as Loki can tell, being honest. He does not remember that they hadn’t played cards the night before. He doesn’t remember that, in fact, he’d been *Red*. He’s going along with Loki’s story because they’d played cards so many times before, and it sounds like something that could’ve likely occurred. Loki is literally planting memories in Thor’s mind which never happened. He’s changing Thor’s past as Thor remembers it, in real time, before his very eyes. And Thor isn’t questioning it at all.

“Yeah, real funny,” Loki says, though he wants to cry.

Loki watches closely as Thor eats his drugged stew. This makes him notice the way Thor is chewing - a bit lopsidedly, more like he’s shuffling the food around in his mouth more than actually chewing. His teeth *are* still bothering him. Thor hadn’t said anything about it since his dental surgery. Thor is determined not to tell him jack shit, it seems.

Loki can’t hide the sourness in his tone. “How’s the teeth feeling these days.”

“Okay, I guess,” says Thor. This *is* a lie.

“You can tell me if they hurt, you know.”

Thor shrugs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t *matter*? Of course it matters!”

“What good would it do for you to know,” Thor asks tiredly.

“Maybe I’m getting sick of you keeping things from me,” Loki bites. “Maybe I care about you being in pain all the time.”

“Okay, fine. My teeth still hurt. Now what. Now what, Loki. What are we gonna do about it. Are you gonna go back to the Big House to get me more dental surgery?” Thor pauses and waits for Loki to answer, knowing full well that that is no longer an option. “Soon you’ll go off with that scientist guy and it won’t be your problem anymore. *I* won’t be your problem anymore. I’m not saying that to make you feel sorry for me, really I’m not. I don’t want or need anyone’s pity, least of all from you. I sincerely hope that once you get out of here you’ll never have to think about me again.” He glowers into his supper. “You’d be better off just to forget all about me.”

“Finish your dinner,” is all Loki says.

Later, Loki is washing the dishes. He keeps peering over his shoulder to check the clock. It’s not even ten. The women aren’t due to come for four more hours. Loki wishes they’d scheduled it earlier, but Mamma seemed intent on doing it at three a.m. for some reason. Waiting is the worst.

“Loki?” comes Thor’s voice from behind.

“Yeah.”

“.....Did you slip me something?”

Loki turns around. Thor is still sitting at their table, blinking at him. His expression is both confused and accusatory.

“I think you’re tired,” Loki answers.

“You slipped me something,” Thor slurs angrily. “You’ve done it before.”

“Maybe your drinking problem is getting the best of you,” Loki says.

“What did you give me.” Thor tries to get up, but his face scrunches up like his head is swimming, and he keels over against the far wall. “I’m gonna - I’m gonna -”

He doesn’t finish his sentence as he crumples to the ground in the kitchen. He crouches near the wall, swaying as if he’s considering trying to get back up, but it looks like he’s having trouble merely keeping his head aloft. Loki goes over and kneels down next to him.

“Why are you doing this.” Thor rasps. His anger has ebbed, and he sounds dazed more than anything. “Is it cos you’re scared I’m gonna hurt you?”

“Sort of, yeah,” Loki whispers.

Thor says nothing for a while. Then: “Okay.”

Just okay. Utterly resigned. Utterly accepting.

“I’m only trying to help you,” Loki tells him.

“Mmm.” Thor plunks himself down more solidly on the floor, as if he’d given up on trying to resist the drug’s effects. He’s going down much harder than the last time Loki did this. The vial of liquid Mamma gave him must’ve been more potent than Sigryn’s pills.

Thor mutters something incoherent, and Loki curls down further to be able to hear him. “What was that?”

Thor mumbles it again: “Don’t let - them - take - the rest of my teeth.”

Loki’s heart shatters. He cradles Thor’s now-limp body in his arms.

“I won’t.”

As per Mamma’s instructions, Loki busies himself by blacking out the cabin windows with cardboard and towels.

Around two a.m., there’s a single, foreboding rap on his cabin door. Loki goes to open it. On his front step is a posse of five women, all dressed in black. Loki can barely make them out in the darkness; he was furthermore strictly warned not to turn on any of his cabin lights. Because of the new moon, there’s no moonlight either. They are nothing but shadows in the night.

“Did he take the full dose?” Mamma asks, almost inaudibly over the howling winter wind.

Loki says nothing; he merely opens the door to reveal Thor, still passed out on their kitchen floor. Mamma nods her approval, almost proud.

A dark skinned woman whom Loki recognizes as Mamma's chief acolyte slips silently into Loki's cabin, leaving the rest of the women outside. She crouches down next to the kitchen vent and pulls out a small flashlight and screwdriver from one of her pockets. She turns the flashlight on and tucks in her mouth. Then, very very carefully, soundlessly, she unscrews the vent's grate and pulls it off, taking care to tuck each screw in her pocket for safekeeping. She aims her flashlight and begins fiddling with something inside the vent. After that, she gets up and goes into Loki's bedroom to fuss around in there too.

She comes back into the kitchen some minutes later. "Okay, the bugs are disabled," she announces. "Y'all can come in now."

"You know how to disable the bugs?" Loki asks.

The woman smiles, but it sits twistedly on her otherwise pretty, babyish face. "Fucked the guy who used to install 'em. Before he got -" She makes a gunshot gesture to her head.

"We can get away with disabling them on occasion, but not for long otherwise it will draw suspicion," Mamma explains as she files in along with Sigryn, Bridgit (the new Commander Grey's wife), and the thin blonde woman from the brothel, whom Loki now knows is named Amora. They all set about taking off their boots and coats at Loki's entryway; underneath their black cloaks they're all wearing pristine white shift dresses. "Brunhilde will be back to turn them back on at six am."

"How do you-"

"I cannot allow her to tell you," Mamma says forcefully, before Loki can finish. "She is the only one of us who knows how to disable Black's bugs, and that is how it must stay. For if this knowledge were to become widespread, it would undoubtedly be overexploited, and ultimately found out. Black *cannot* know we know how to do this. We only do it sparingly, with extreme discretion, in situations such as these."

Loki nods. He doesn't like it, but her reasoning is sound.

"Hey," Sigryn greets Loki by kissing him on the cheek. Loki is glad to see her. He's missed her terribly the last few days.

"Thanks for coming," Loki says, and means it; especially given what Thor had done to Green. He wouldn't blame her for not wanting to come. The fact that she's volunteered to be here means the world to him.

Sigryn's eyes gleam. "Wouldn't miss it. My first purge. I wanted to see one for myself, to know what to expect -"

Her grin falters. *In case we have to do it to Green.*

Amora and Bridgit hover around Thor's unconscious body, seemingly fascinated by him. Meanwhile, Mamma's acolyte - the woman Brunhilde - goes back into Loki's bedroom, and by the sounds of it, starts throwing shit around.

"Hey Red," Sigryn says softly, almost melancholy, as she crouches down beside Thor's body. She brushes his hair off his forehead. "How're ya doin', bud."

"He's so peaceful-lookin' when he sleeps," Bridgit comments, head tilted as if she's never seen him before. Maybe she hasn't, up close. Amora keeps quiet.

Loki was already aware that many of the women here have a crush on Thor - but he's surprised at how unjealous he feels by their admiration. Maybe it's the tenderness with which they're handling him. Thor doesn't get a lot of genuine human compassion here in the Compound. Loki sometimes feels stupid for loving Thor, despite knowing who Thor is and what he's become. It's heartening that these women still see Thor as a person, as someone worthy of kindness.

"Oh Jesus, are we just gonna stand around and stare at him?" Brunhilde grumbles, having emerged once again from Loki's bedroom.

"Yes. Brunhilde is right," Mamma says. "We're here to help poor Red, not ogle him. My daughters, Red is Loki's sváss."

The women gasp as if this means something. As usual, Loki has no idea what Mamma is talking about.

"Sváss?"

"Soulmates," Mamma explains. "Or, more accurately, *beloved*. An ancient, powerful term, one that designates those whose destinies are intertwined."

".....They are?" Loki asks dumbly.

"Oh yes. I know you feel it."

"Can *he*?!"

Mamma half-smiles cryptically. "Loki, I have brought my daughters here at great risk to help you, and to help the man being smothered under *Red*. We ask for nothing in return, but I think you should tell us why we are doing this. Be as vague or as specific as you like."

Loki chews his lip. Where to even begin.

"Well....Red saved me from the Rig when he didn't have to. He's been kind to me. He's treated me well. Never hit me or nothin'. He's a good person, deep down. I know it might not seem that way sometimes," He locks eyes with Sigryn briefly, "But he is."

The kitchen falls into silence. Mamma stares at him in the darkness.

"Thank you, Loki," Mamma says, and smiles at him with a slight nod.

"Wait - There's more," Loki blurts out. "Uh. There's a lot more. I want to thank you guys for coming, because I know you're all putting yourselves in danger by being here. The truth is - the truth is - Red and I were raised together. My mother was his father's kept woman."

Sigryn's voice is a breath. "What?"

Loki looks at her sheepishly. "Yeah. His dad and my mom were together for almost a decade. That makes Red like my brother, sort of. At least I thought of him that way. Or some twisted version of a brother, I guess, since I don't love him like a brother. I love him like.... like that word."

"Sváss," supplies Mamma.

"Yeah - that. I've loved him basically for as long as I can remember. He left home when I was nine

and - God, I've tried to find him. I wanted him so bad, I wanted -" Loki's voice cracks. He knows he's rambling, yet he can't stop himself: "I wanted him to save me from my life. Save me from the street, save me from my pimp. Save me the way he did when I was a kid when - when I was getting creeped on by a friend of his father's. He protected me. He made sure I was safe at night."

The room is so quiet, the women stare at him.

"And - uh, I wouldn't be surprised if some of you here have experienced that kind of thing as kids, as girls. The world is cruel to people like us. But he was never cruel to me." Loki is sick of calling Thor by the name he's known by here. Loudly, Loki proclaims: "His name is Thor."

"*Thor*," Sigryn echoes. She beams down at him. "Hi, Thor."

The women coo at Thor with newfound reverence. Witnessing their appreciation makes Loki want to cry. No one except his mother knew what Thor did for him, or cared. The women here care.

"You see, my daughters, why I have called for your assistance," resumes Mamma at length. "But I must be frank: we are in grave danger, and not only from being discovered. Red himself is going to resist this. He will fight us. And he is strong. I do not know exactly what will happen here tonight, but I have faith in our Great Mother to see to our safety. One thing I do know: we cannot stop once this begins. If we do not see this process through to its natural conclusion, it's possible that the Tar will not settle, and Thor will be forever lost to Red. I have asked each of you, one by one, for your aid, and you have all individually consented. If any of you have any final qualms about participating, speak now. This is your last chance to opt out. If even one of you leaves midway through, it may tip the balance in Red's favour, and the rest of us will all be put at great risk."

It's quiet. So quiet. They're all in.

Mamma nods solemnly. "Then let us begin."

It takes three of them to lug Thor's body into the bedroom. Loki now sees what Brunhilde had been doing in there: Loki's blankets and pillows are out in the hallway, and his iron wrought bed has been tipped up against the wall, leaving an empty space in the middle of the room. Candles are set up in the corners, providing the only light. There's a white substance on the floor in a horseshoe shape, with the opening facing the bedroom door. It's through this opening that they drag Thor's body. They arrange Thor such that he is spread-eagled on the floor face up in the middle of the horseshoe ring. It's large enough that Thor is comfortably ensconced by it.

"Very good," says Mamma. "Now we must get his shirt off. Take care not to disturb the salt..."

Bridgit and Brunhilde are the ones to do this, with Loki's help. Why any of this is important, Loki doesn't know. He's resigned to go along with whatever at this point.

"Whoa," says Bridgit, once Thor's shirt is off. Brunhilde rolls her eyes.

"Yes, yes, he is a handsome man," Mamma says tiredly. "Can we please, my daughters. Sigryn, you will take his left arm; Amora, take his right. Bridgit and Brunhilde will hold down his legs. Yes, sit on him, use your whole weight, just like that. Trust me, you will need it. Hold his upper arms *down*, Amora...."

The women assume their positions. Sigryn sits astride Thor's right wrist with her hands clutched on Thor's bicep, pinning him down. Amora does the same on Thor's left arm. Bridgit and Brunhilde sit on each of Thor's legs in a similar manner. They all face inward, towards Thor, with Mamma

standing at his head.

“And Loki my dear, straddle his hips as though you were making love.”

“Uh, okay,” says Loki, and lowers himself over Thor’s hips.

Mamma kneels down and pulls out a few items from her skirt: a small jar of what must be alkanet, a literal salt shaker, an old towel, and a weird little metal thing on a chain - a censer. She sets these items on the floor beside her.

“Give me your palms,” Mamma says to Loki.

Loki extends his hands outwards towards her, palms up. Mamma takes her alkanet paste and paints the surface of Loki’s palms with it. She uses so much of it that once she’s done, Loki’s hands are gloopy.

“Don’t touch him until I say,” Mamma instructs.

Next, she cups Thor’s face in her hands, such that she’s speaking to him upside down. “Thor, my child. Can you hear me? Thor, we are here to help you. Red is our common enemy. Please know that whatever happens, our battle is with Red, not you. I am sorry if we injure you.”

She looks up and makes eye contact with each of them in succession. “My daughters - my son - let us begin.”

Mamma begins to sing in that strange language as she lights her censer.

"Great Mother, Great Mother. I call upon thee for strength. Hear our solemn plea. Watch over us as we bring your son back to your loving bosom." She rises to her feet and swings the censer, filling the room with an acrid herbal smoke. She moves towards Amora, perched on Thor’s left arm, and then swings it above her head.

“On whom do you call?”

“I call upon Júlia Fazekas. Angel Maker,” says Amora.

Mamma nods. She continues going in a circle around Thor. She is now behind Loki at Thor’s left leg.

“On whom do you call?”

“I call upon my namesake. Brunhilde the Valkyrie.”

Loki hears more footfalls: Mamma moving towards Bridgit, on Thor’s right leg.

“On whom do you call?”

“Saint Olga of Kiev, the vengeful,” comes the response.

Mamma reenters Loki’s field of view. She stands at Sigryn’s head and swings her censer.

“On whom do you call?”

"Jane," says Sirgyn softly, eyeing the cursive tattoo across Thor's rib. "I think Jane would help us."

The women exchange fleeting glances around their circle.

"Yes," Mamma says thoughtfully. She grows in conviction as she mulls on this. "Yes. Jane if you are here, please grant your blessing. You knew this man as Red; his real name is Thor. You and Thor were misplaced through neither of your faults; your paths should have never crossed. I know both Thor and Red have wronged you many times over. We ask that you show Thor mercy."

"He told me to tell you he's sorry," Loki pipes up, even though he isn't sure whether it's appropriate to do so. "He is - sorry, Jane."

From where she's sitting on Thor's right arm, Sigryn shoots him a wry *you fuckwit* kind of smile.

"Jane?" Mamma calls. "Jane? Jane if you are here....? Jane? Jane?" A strange, fleeting emotion crosses Mamma's face, and her lips thin.

"....Is she malevolent?" comes Brunhilde's voice.

"She is not here," Mamma says simply, though she still seems perturbed. "We must proceed regardless. I will close the circle."

Mamma sets her censer down, picks up her salt shaker, and moves behind Loki again. Loki curls over his shoulder to see. Mamma pours salt down to fill the horseshoe's gap, thus turning the horseshoe ring into a complete, full circle and enclosing them all within it.

Mamma returns to the front and kneels back down at Thor's head. "I'm going to wake Red now," she says, hushed. "Keep him down. Do not ease up even for a moment."

Mamma bends over so that her face is hovering over Thor's upside down and takes his head in her hands. "Red. Open your eyes, Red. I know you can hear us."

Thor begins to stir. His brow furrows, almost a wince. He tries to turn away, but he can't with Mamma gripping his head. He squirms. His body goes taut, then lax again. His hips buck under Loki's pelvis.

"Red," Mamma says, almost sing-song, even a taunt. She curls over even more, such that their faces are a mere breath apart. "Red. Red. Red. Come and meet me. I am unafraid."

And - Thor opens his eyes. He stares straight up at Mamma with that same unblinking, hyper-focused stare Loki had been subjected to the night before.

"There you are," Mamma says. "Hello, Red. Do you know who I am?"

Thor says nothing. He does not seem to notice anyone else in the room, or even that he's being pinned down, so intense is his attention on Mamma. His chest rises and falls in rapid shallow pants. His nostrils flare.

"I know you know who I am. You felt me during the séance. I felt you too."

Thor makes a noise: a deep rumble in his throat, a crackling, gurgling kind of sound. And it goes on an unnaturally long time - far longer than the span of a normal human breath. As it peters off it fades into what sounds like a low, distorted laugh.

Thor flexes his arm then, suddenly, and nearly dislodges Sigryn, despite her entire body weight resting firmly on his wrist. Sigryn gasps in alarm.

"Hold him down," Mamma shouts. "Do not give him any purchase."

Sigryn recenters herself. She doesn't look so flippant about this as she did earlier.

“Red, you are corrupting the transcendental love that Thor and Loki share,” Mamma tells him. “And so I must root you out and destroy you.”

Mamma takes her jar of alkanet paste and slathers her own hands in it, then cups Thor’s face again. Thor grunts and thrashes as soon as she touches him, but he can't move far with five grown adults sitting on him. Still, it's harrowing that he's able to shift any of them at all. No normal person should be able to do that.

Thor’s snarls fade to pained whimpers.

“It burns,” Thor moans, in his normal voice. “Tell her to stop. Loki, please. Tell her to stop.”

“No,” Mamma barks, before Loki can say or do anything. “Stay as you are. Keep him down.”

“It hurts.” Thor writhes on the floor in what looks like agony. His eyes lock on Loki’s, and they’re so tormented it makes Loki’s heart wrench. “Why are you letting her do this?”

Mamma is firm: “Stay as you are. We must see this through.”

Loki, Thor begs. ~~please~~.

“Be silent,” spits Mamma. “You have no power here.”

Thor grins then, wide and distorted and shark-like; the red paste on his face makes him look especially maniacal.

“Exodus twenty-two eighteen.”

At this Mamma snarls, baring her teeth. “You are a vile, unnatural, duplicitous creature,” she hisses. “I am cleansing you. I am drawing it out.”

Mamma pinches Thor’s cheeks to pry his jaws open. She spits a huge wad of saliva right in his mouth, which Loki was not expecting. Thor clearly was not expecting it either. He tries to turn his head away to spit it right back out, but Mamma’s got her towel ready, and she bunches it over his mouth to prevent him from doing so.

“Great Mother Great Mother, lend your aid, cleanse your son of evil,” she incants as she looks upwards, clutching Thor’s head. Thor makes a strange sound as he struggles, but it’s muffled underneath the towel, and Loki can’t make out if Thor was trying to say something or if he was just groaning like an animal. Mamma goes on: “Bring him back to us. Great Mother, bring your son Thor back to your loving bosom....”

Thor's eyes roll back in his head until only the whites of his eyes are visible. He starts to shake violently like he’s having a seizure.

“Press down on his chest, Loki,” Mamma commands, startling Loki. He’s never seen her look at him like that - fierce and wild, a force of nature, like a

great

storm

“....*Hard*. With both hands at once, one atop the other, and all your strength. We must restart his heart.”

"Restart?" Loki echoes shrilly.

"Do it. Do it now!!"

Loki is too riled up to think to question what he's doing or why. He places his alkanet-stained hands on Thor's chest - an act Thor definitely does not like - and, using his bodyweight, Loki presses down, hard, right on Thor's sternum, making Thor cry out into the towel that's still bunched over his mouth.

"Harder, Loki. We must resuscitate him. Break his ribs if you have to!"

His adrenaline spiking, Loki gives it his all this time. He slams downward with both hands, right over Thor's heart, hard enough that his wrists throb sharply in pain. Thor makes a choking, winded kind of noise. His body contorts as much as it can while still being pinned underneath five people.

"It's coming up," says Mamma, removing the towel from Thor's face. "Hold him - Steady -"

Thor gags as he thrashes. He wretches, a horrible noise. And heaves. And heaves.

"Steady," Mamma says, calm.

Thor's eyes bulge. Whatever it is, it's coming.

"Now. All of you. Off!"

They all spring off him just in time for Mamma and Brunhilde to roll Thor on his side. Thor begins to vomit uncontrollably - but it's nothing like normal vomit. It's black and stringy, unnaturally cold, and seems to be coming out of his nose and tear ducts too. Thor keeps heaving and it keeps coming, and coming, great ropey thick swaths of it, pooling on the bedroom floor.

Sigryn looks horrified. They all do, except for Mamma, whose face is resolute. She cradles Thor's head and holds back his hair.

With one final dry heave, Thor goes still, and passes out amidst a puddle of his own Ríg Tar.

"It is done," Mamma says breathlessly, sitting back on her heels. There's a sheen of sweat glistening on her forehead, and her dress is caked in Tar. "Get me a washcloth for his face."

The women clean the mess in silence. By the end, their pristine white dresses are likewise sullied with...whatever it is Thor had spewed up. As they file out of Loki's cabin, they touch their foreheads to Loki's in succession. Sigryn especially looks freaked out. She says nothing, but when she hugs him, she holds on for a very, very long time. Mamma is the last to leave.

"I've done my best," Mamma says, patting Loki's shoulder. "I have gotten as much out as I could. I was not able to uproot it all. But it should help. For now."

"When will he wake up?" Loki croaks.

"Before the night is out, I should think," Mamma says wearily. She looks older, gaunt. "Keep this, just in case." She passes him the rest of the container of alkanet paste and kisses Loki on the lips, as she often does. "Let me know how he is."

"Thank you," Loki whispers, not just for the alkanet, but for everything. He cannot put the full extent of his gratitude into words right now, but he thinks Mamma understands. "Bright Blessings."

Mamma smiles at him despite her own exhaustion. The expression on her face is one of poignancy, of both love and sorrow.

“Bright Blessings, Loki.”

And so, Loki is once again alone. Not knowing what else to do, Loki goes back into his bedroom and sits against the wall. Thor is still on the floor in the middle of the bedroom, wrapped in a blanket. He’s just as unconscious as ever, but he seems so much smaller than before - like a squeezed out tube of toothpaste.

Loki closes his eyes and lolls his head against the wall. He’s so, so tired. He tries not to think about the fact that he has to get up to go to work at the laundry in a couple of hours.

He’s nodding off when a rustling noise rouses him.

Thor jerks fully awake all at once. He scrambles backwards until he slams into the far wall, the blanket twisted around his feet. His eyes are wild when he locks them on Loki.

"You're here." A bit of Tar-tinted spit froths out of his mouth.

“Yeah,” Loki says warily. “I’m here.”

“You shouldn't be here," Thor sounds panicked. "I’ve seen you before. Where have I seen you?"

Loki’s heart drops. “Do you not recogn-”

"Sh - it's very important. That I try to remember."

Thor uses the far wall to get himself to his feet, wincing as he clutches his alkanet-stained chest. The fact that their bed is still tipped up against the wall does not seem to register with him. Nothing about where he is, or what happened, seems to register with him at all.

Loki gets up too. "Maybe you should sit down. Take it easy-”

"I'm trapped here," Thor says shrilly. More Tar dribbles from his lower lip and onto the floor. "I’m trapped. I’m trapped. I’m trapped. You’re trapped too. You shouldn't be here. *Why are you here?*"

"Thor. Calm down. Look at me. Do you know who I am?"

Thor shakes his head, and Loki can see his eyes are bloodshot - probably from the vomiting - and wet with tears. “Not who. *Where*. Where have I seen you?"

Thor starts to pace in a circle, clawing at his own hair. His breathing is fast and labored and gravelly, like he’s on the verge of a panic attack. Or a psychotic break.

“Thor, I really think you should sit down-”

“You’re here because of *me*! Because of what I did!”

“Yes,” soothes Loki. “Yes, I’m here because you rescued me. You recognized me when I came off the truck, and you had pity on me, and you brought me to live with you-”

Thor stops pacing, all at once. He looks Loki dead in the eye. “No," he says, voice low and even and grave. "You’re *trapped* here because of me.”

“I’m not trapped -” Loki begins, although he kind of is. “You saved me. Remember? You saved me

from the Rig.”

Thor shakes his head. His eyes are bright and haunted and confused. Leftover Tar from his tear ducts stains his tears black as they course down his cheeks in rivulets.

“Then why do I always see you out there?”

Loki’s heart stops. Thor has completely lost it.

"That’s - no. You’re mistaken. I’ve never been out there. I *know* I haven't."

"No, I saw you. I saw you." Thor grows in certainty, though he sounds, and looks, delirious. "But you were...you. Grown. As you are. Not a child. You were happy. So happy. You had the happiest eyes. I was happy too. I had all my teeth...."

“Thor,” Loki says lowly. “What are you talking about.”

Thor touches his own lips with reverence, and he gestures with his hands, as if he could see a scene playing out in front of his eyes.

"You kissed me on your sixteenth birthday.....I had come home to borrow Odin's drill, so I was standing over the kitchen counter eating your leftover birthday cake with my bare hands. You came in and caught me. But you weren’t mad. I asked you what you wished for that year. You told me I had frosting on my face. That’s when you kissed me - right on the corner of my lip. Right here.

“I was surprised, but maybe not *that* surprised; I had long suspected you had developed feelings for me. I could tell every time I tried bringing a girlfriend home, you’d get all sullen and moody and wouldn’t talk to me for days. I couldn't encourage you - you were still a kid, and I’d known you since you were little. But I admit, it did make me look at you different.

"Odin died not long thereafter. He'd lived a few years longer because he didn't have to work himself to the bone with me at the shop to help. I moved back home, into the house. The night of Odin's funeral was the first night you crawled into my bed. You said you'd do anything so long as you and your mom could stay. I turned you down - I promised I’d never evict either of you, that you didn’t have to offer yourself to me in that way. It broke my heart that you’d think I would put you out just because the house was now legally mine. But really, I think you just wanted to sleep with me. Not because you wanted to be kept, but because you wanted *me*. I always knew, deep down, you wanted me.

"Your mom stayed on as a live-in housekeeper. And you....I was getting swamped at the shop, so I hired you to manage the front and handle the phones. You were good at it. You worked so hard, probably to impress me, which you did. You took night classes and got your GED. When you graduated your mom was so proud. I was proud of you too.

"We spent a lot of time together at the shop. A lot of late nights. I think that's when I started sneaking glances at you, even though I probably shouldn't've. You were growing into an attractive young man - smart and capable and - and *funny*... And although I never looked at men, I couldn’t keep myself from looking at you.

"One Friday night we were at the shop, working late, so we ordered in pizza. We had cheap beer too. It was thunderstorming outside. You got a little tipsy and you told me that you loved me. That you had always loved me. And I - I knew, by then, that I loved you too.

"I made you wait until you were twenty-one to make love to you. I wanted to make it special....but in actuality it was clumsy and awkward. I didn't know what I was doing and neither did you. We

were both too nervous I think. And excited - even giddy. I don't think either of us came, but subsequent attempts went better.

"We sent your mom to rehab. She got clean. We could tell she was getting lonely so we set her up with the guy who delivered parts to our shop - a struggling widower with four small kids. It was our little year long project, playing cupid. She ended up marrying him, and we had a modest reception for them at the park. She loved him, and she loved her stepkids. She would still come visit us, though. She brought us food - you never really got the swing of cooking, sorry to say. And we'd go over there for barbecues and holidays. She lived to get old. She was happy. So were you. So was I.

"That's what would've happened if I never left home. If I never came to the Compound. If I never got recruited, never got put on the meat market. I saw us as we would have been - as we *should* have been, if I never left you behind. My greatest mistake -"

Thor starts to get hysterical. He resumes pacing around their small bedroom like a caged animal.

"This is all wrong. We shouldn't be here. None of this should be happening. We're lost. We're trapped in the wrong timeline, *the wrong story*, and it's all my fault. I went against fate. I made myself corrupted. That's why the Tar has taken root. It's trying to suck my humanity out - it's trying to make me forget. But I remember, Loki. I remember everything. I remember - I remember - the summer - when you became destined to be mine -"

Loki is overcome. "I thought of you every day. I tried to find you. I looked for you. For - for *years* -"

Thor embraces Loki with a kind of desperation that would be impossible to resist, even if Loki wanted to.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I left you behind."

Thor hugs his knees to his chest as he sits next to Loki against the bedroom wall. He listens to Loki explain what Mamma and the women had done in complete silence.

"I'm sorry it got so bad," Thor says, after Loki has finished. "I couldn't control it -"

"I know," says Loki. "I know that wasn't really you."

A pregnant pause. "But it was - me. It's as much *me* as I am now. Two sides of the same coin. No - More than that." Thor seems to think. "It's like becoming a sphere, when once you were just a circle. Like being fleshed out in ways beyond your comprehension. And you know what?" Thor's voice is very quiet, afraid of his own confession: "I like it."

Loki shivers.

"It's going to consume me," Thor goes on miserably. "It's going to erase me forever."

Loki finally puts the pieces together. "And that's what Black wants. He wants....*Red*. And you agreed to give yourself over to it in exchange for my safe passage out of the Compound."

Thor shrugs, as if his bargain, his sacrifice, were a matter of inconsequence. "I'm gonna turn anyway. What you did for me tonight - this *purge* - will only hold it off for so long. It's going to come back. There's nothing we can do to stop it."

Loki looks away. Duntsch had said the same thing.

“What’s out there,” Loki whispers.

Thor’s head lolls back. He looks up as if the answer were written on their bedroom ceiling.

“Everything,” he whispers at last. “And nothing. It’s like a dream - when you wake up you can’t remember it anymore, only bits and pieces, and the more you try and think about it, the more it slips from your fingers, like grasping handfuls of sand....” Thor’s face scrunches up like he’s in pain. Tears course down his cheeks. “It’s like dying, over and over. Like having your life flash before your eyes - except it’s every life you’ve ever lived, not just this one. All at once. It’s terror and it’s-” He exhales as if it were his final breath, the point of ultimate climax: “...*Ecstasy*.”

“...And you saw me?”

“It depends,” says Thor, “What you mean by *you*. Would you really be *you* without the life you’ve lived? Are you *you* no matter what? Is your *youness* an inherent, immutable thing that never changes?”

“I don’t know,” Loki stammers. He’s never heard Thor talk like this. “I’m not sure I understand.”

Thor reaches over to tuck a stray lock of Loki’s hair behind his ear. “Who would you be if no one ever put their hands on you?” His voice is reflective, tender but tinged with melancholy and regret. “If you hadn’t had to grow up so fast? If you didn’t flinch anytime someone raised their voice? What would that Loki be like?” Thor’s hand lingers to cup Loki’s cheek. “What you’ve been through *is* a part of you, but it doesn’t define you. There’s always gonna be a piece of you that’s pure Loki. Just as there’s a piece of me that’s pure Thor. The rest is this -” he holds up his heavily tattooed hands, and he smiles, almost like he’s letting Loki in on a funny little secret. “What we accrue along the way.”

“I still don’t understand,” Loki says helplessly.

“I *saw* that Loki - the Loki that hasn’t cried as many tears as you have. He was as real to me then as you are now. He exists. His happiness was so beautiful....”

“Why?” is all Loki can say. “Why would it show that to you?”

“Mocking me, maybe, with what could’ve been. I don’t pretend to understand why it does what it does. I suspect it enjoys making me suffer. Helps the Tar grow in thick.” Thor starts to laugh, an empty, self-deprecating sound. “You know, for years I tried to decipher what it was trying to tell me. I thought if I could just put enough pieces together, I would understand. Ha! I couldn’t even *see* the pieces, let alone how they’d fit into place. But now the Veil has been lifted from my sight. It turns out I’ve known the truth all along; it was simply too bright and I couldn’t look directly at it. The ultimate truth of the Rig is this: we’re supposed to end up together. We’re bonded together through time and space. Our purest selves. You and me. Every iteration of us.”

“Bonded together,” Loki echoes, recalling everything that Mamma had said.

“Yes. Or at least - that’s how it should be, in the good timelines. But we’re not in a good timeline, are we? We’re in a bad story. A very bad story. Neither of us have happy endings in it. And it’s my fault. I’m the reason our timelines diverged. I’m the reason we wound up here. Everything went to shit the moment I left you behind. You weren’t supposed to live this life. You were supposed to be happy. *With me*. You loved me so deeply and I turned my back on you.”

“You...you know that I love you?”

“As I said, the Veil has been lifted,” Thor answers. He looks afraid, and contrite, and simultaneously awed. “Many things have been revealed to me. Many great and terrible things. Yes, Loki, I know that you love me. Ever since you were a child, you’ve loved me. You love me still. I’m sorry that I didn’t see it before now.”

“Do you know *why* I fell in love with you?” Loki begs. “You have to know, Thor. Tell me you know. You said - you said you remembered everything-”

Thor seems to retreat into himself, as if looking for the answer within. He closes his eyes.

“Yes, I remember,” he murmurs at last. “Our summer.”

Loki’s heart is pounding in his chest. “What about our summer.”

Thor’s eyes blink open but they’re unfocused. He smiles a distant little smile.

“You were my little shadow, all summer long. You followed me everywhere.”

“Yes, I did,” Loki says urgently. “Can you tell me why?”

Thor reaches out to touch Loki’s face, as if mapping it would help him remember.

“Something happened, didn’t it. Something happened to make you love me.” His eyebrows pinch. “You were so small...”

Thor keeps staring at him for an uncomfortably long time. Loki has to hold his breath to keep quiet.

“It was Odin’s friend. Bee....Bjornssen. He came to live with us. That summer.”

“Yes,” Loki breathes. “What about him?”

“I caught him. Didn’t I. I caught him.....in the kitchen....with you....”

Loki needs to hear it. “Doing what, Thor. What did you see.”

Thor’s face is searching, like he’s trying to see through a fog. Then, all at once:

“I caught him molesting you.”

Thor claps his hand over his mouth and emits a broken-sounding sob.

“Yes,” Loki says. It feels so good to hear Thor finally say it, breathing new life into the memory he’d always held to be true. “*Yes*. Then what.”

“Then...” Thor’s hand leaves his mouth, revealing the raw emotion on his face. His entire body is shaking. “Then he offered me a hundred dollars if I forgot I saw anything.”

Loki doesn’t remember *that* at all. “What?”

“Fuck.” Thor rubs his eye sockets with his palms. “*Fuck*, that was so messed up-”

Loki surges forward to accost him with a kiss.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited to thank you for that? For protecting me?”

“It’s what anyone should have done,” Thor stammers. “You were a *kid*-”

“Not one other person, besides my mom, has ever helped me without asking anything in return. Not one. Only you.”

Thor looks so, so painfully sad. “You've had it bad all this time, haven't you.”

“So have you.”

They sit in silence as they absorb everything that has happened. Loki's mind is whorling. He can hardly believe that all this time, he was right about him and Thor. That in fact, they were meant to be together, that there are universes in which he and Thor were always a couple. Universes in which he was happy.

“Bjornsson was a pedophile.” Thor repeats to himself like he still can't wrap his mind around it. He rubs his forehead. “*Fuck*. I can't believe I forgot...”

Loki says nothing. An indescribable, somewhat unsettling feeling has come over him. Having Thor confirm his memory, while validating in the truest sense if the word, has also made Loki feel somewhat ill. It really did happen - his molestation. He wasn't imagining it. He didn't make it up. He was molested as a kid.

“And Odin didn't believe us,” Thor spits. “He took that pervert's side.”

Loki rubs his temples. He kind of wants to stop talking about this.

“Did he -” Thor's face is tentative. “Did he ever...”

“No,” says Loki. “He never managed to have sex with me.”

“It's not sex if it's with a kid, Loki,” Thor points out gently.

Loki tucks his head back into his knees. He doesn't like to think about that distinction. A sizable portion of his working life was spent underage. Which means, all that time, he'd never really had sex. He'd only been raped. Over and over and over, and often on tape. And that's a thought that Loki cannot bring himself to face.

“What else did he....?” Thor asks.

“I'd rather not rehash the details,” Loki hedges. “Not tonight. It's a little much for one evening.”

“Okay,” says Thor, and falls silent. When he speaks again, it's blessedly not another probing question: “Must've struck you as weird when you got here and I didn't remember any of that, huh.”

Loki blurts out a little laugh. *Weird* doesn't even begin to describe his experiences with this place.

“You must've thought I'd lost my mind,” Thor goes on. “*I feel* like I'm losing my mind, most of the time. Well - I am, aren't I? That's exactly what's happening.” Thor's voice turns pensive. He says it again, more quietly. “I'm losing my mind....”

Loki rallies himself. “Look. If it gets bad we'll purge you again. As many times as you need. I'll get the girls back here, and Mamma-”

“Red's not gonna let you do it again,” Thor tells him tonelessly. “I know too much about what it is you've done here tonight. And I hate to tell you this, but once the Tar grows back I may try to....retaliate.”

“Retaliate? Against who? Me?”

Thor looks away guiltily. “And the others. The women.”

Loki hadn’t considered *that* at all. It horrifies him that he’d unknowingly put them all in danger.

“What do we do.”

“The same thing as before,” says Thor. “You go off with that scientist. You get out of here. You forget about me and move on with your life.”

“And leave you here to be consumed by Tar?” Loki exclaims, outraged. “I don’t know how you can say that. After everything that’s happened tonight, after everything we’ve been through, you expect me to just *move on* with my life? Thor - I thought of you every single day for twelve years. I looked for you when I didn’t even know if you were alive or dead. *We’re meant to be together*. You said so yourself. And you’re telling me I need to *forget you*?”

Thor’s eyes shine helplessly in the darkness. Loki can yell and rant all he wants; it doesn’t change anything. They’re just as stuck as before.

“If only we could go back....” Loki sighs. “Redo it all....”

Thor says nothing. He sits very still, staring at the floor in front of him, although his eyes are unseeing.

“Thor?”

Thor looks at Loki suddenly. “What if we did.”

“What if we what.”

“Go back. Do it over. What if we did.”

“Uh.” Loki blinks. “Because we can’t?”

Thor sits up. “Where’s that card. The one with the writing. The card you showed me outside of Central Block.”

“I burned it,” Loki says dumbly. “Black was after it-”

Thor looks horrified so Loki adds, “I memorized it first, before I burned it-”

“Show me,” Thor demands. “Write it out.”

Loki hastens to retrieve his ratty notebook and pen. He rips out a page, and with trembling hands, writes out the message from Moo’s card as he remembers it, all the while urging himself to take his time, to think, to keep his hand steady. When he’s finished, he passes the page to Thor, who squints at it for several heartstopping seconds.

“What is it,” Loki asks, hushed but urgent. “What does it say?”

“It’s directions,” Thor says at last.

“Directions?”

“Directions *home*. To the right timeline, the right universe. Loki, this is Rigspeak.”

Thor’s face lights up like he’s holding a winning lottery ticket. He springs to his feet.

"This is it Loki! This is our way out of this place. This *universe*. We use these directions on the Rig to send us home. That's why fate brought you here. Fate was trying to correct my mistake. Don't you see? We have to end up together. Not just in this story, but in the other stories too. Thousands of stories, just like this one. But we always wind up together. If we don't, we end tragically. We have to escape this story. That's what they want. That's why they're here, reading this. They're rooting for us. They want to see how our story ends."

"You want to go to the Rig?" says Loki weakly. It's all he can manage, since half of what Thor is saying makes no sense whatsoever.

"Loki, I'm turning, there's no reversing it. We have to try for the Rig, and we have to do it together, before the Tar consumes me entirely. We go back to the moment our timelines diverged. We *fix this*. If you don't want to, I'd understand. I know I sound crazy. I know you have no reason to believe me. If you wanted to go off with that scientist and live out this timeline, you could. I wouldn't stop you. I would accept my fate here. But I promise you, if we went back, I would give you a better life than the one you've had. The one you *will* have. We could have a second chance to be together. To be happy. We could be that Thor and that Loki."

Time in that moment seems to stand still. Loki reflects on everything he's been through. Everything Duntsch had admitted. The compass - hadn't Mamma told him the compass would one day lead him home?

Like a lost lamb, she'd called him. *So far from where you're supposed to be*.

Loki can't believe what he's agreeing to. "Okay."

"Okay?" echoes Thor, equally amazed.

Loki can only nod. "Yes. I want to try. I want - to go back. I want that life with you."

"Oh Loki," Thor sobs, taking Loki into his arms, as desperately as if Loki were a buoy in the middle of the ocean and he were drowning. "Thank you. Thank you. You'll save me too, d'you know that?"

Loki allows himself to bask in this moment for only a few moments. His head is spinning. But he can't ignore the question pressing on his mind, so he pulls away to ask:

"But - to get to the Rig, don't we gotta escape the Compound first?"

Thor's mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

"I'll find a way," he says at last. "I promise you. If you do this with me, I will find a way."

Chapter End Notes

Comments are my world. I would also appreciate a [retweet](#) if you enjoyed this fic! My

handle is @teresalifts <3

I HAVE FANART!!!!

[By the inimitable @DollartreeLoki on Twitter - Poor Thor's lookin' a bit fucked up
A severe Tar infection will do that!](#)

[By @vjörnir on Twitter - this one stresses me out, which is certainly a Mood for this
fic](#)

Please like/retweet and support these wonderful artists! I'm getting spoiled, omg
<3<3<3

eight of nine

Chapter Notes

I just want to point out that when I get comments from you on this fic, they show up in my AO3 inbox as “(username) on The Rig” lol. Looks like all y’all are on The Rig too and ya didn’t even know it....

Thank you to everyone who has supported me by leaving kudos, comments or retweeting this fic. It means the world to me. Big thanks to Sara as well for all her hard work translating this to Japanese <3

There's also a special project in the works inspired by this story, so stay tuned for that too!!!

TW for extreme disturbing content and [violence](#). I don't think anyone should be surprised by that by now, but still.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The weeks that follow are strange. Thor moves with purpose, galvanized by his quest to secure them a means of escaping the Compound. Now that he's been freshly purged, he comes home each night with haunted eyes. Loki doesn't ask where he goes, and Thor doesn't tell him.

Loki is having a hard time wrapping his brain around what they're setting out to do. Simply escaping the Compound will be a near insurmountable task. It would be one thing for Thor to slip out by himself - Thor's got security clearance; he's a trusted Commander. But smuggling Loki out is another thing entirely. Supplies are trucked into the Compound, but nothing is ever shipped out. All Compound garbage is incinerated onsite. Security around both of the exits is airtight, as one would expect from an overseer like Black. As far as Loki knows, no one has ever managed to successfully escape the Compound. When he asks Sigryn about it, she tells him that anyone caught trying to escape is *made an example of*. She doesn't elaborate any further than that. Loki probably doesn't want to know.

Then there's the whole logistical problem of getting out to the Rig itself, which is situated out in the middle of the ocean. And as Loki understands it, he and Thor both have to be present on the Rig at the same time for this *alternate universe* thing to take effect. Loki wants the future Thor is offering, he does, but at the same time, the thought of executing their plan is so frightening, so daunting, so *crazy*, that Loki there are moments when he wants to call it all off and resign himself to being Duntsch's pet.

But, at the same time, Loki knows he has to try. He would regret it forever if he didn't. It's not as though his current life has anything to offer him. He knows exactly the kind of future that awaits him as a sex worker - if he's even ever sent to Duntsch at all. Loki figures that Black will wind up

sending him to the Rig anyway, so why not take this risk and do it on his own terms?

Still, that doesn't make the prospect of *going to the Rig and ending his life as he knows it* any less terrifying. Loki can't look out at it. He can't think about it. It's too much.

Loki focuses on getting through each day one by one. When the cabin phone rings in the evenings, Loki allows Thor to answer it. Every time, Thor gets hung up on. Soon the phone calls cease.

Loki's asthma means Thor still has to go outside for smoke breaks, which gives them both an excuse to converse in private away from their bugged cabin. Loki will say this about the purge: it's allowed him to talk to Thor - to *really* talk to Thor - for what seems like the first time ever. With no Tar to cloud his vision, Thor is finally able to reminisce about their shared past. Thor even remembers things Loki doesn't - quirks about his mom, memories of Christmases at home, that one ill-fated road trip they attempted as a family. He still won't say how he ended up in the Compound, however. Loki doesn't know if it's because he genuinely doesn't remember, or if he just doesn't want to talk about it. Loki is not particularly keen on sharing where he'd been either, so he doesn't press.

They're outside for one such smoke break. Loki has given up haranguing Thor about his smoking. He supposes it doesn't matter if Thor smokes, or drinks, or if all his teeth fall out. Nothing about this world or anything in it will matter soon enough.

"There's something I've always wanted to ask you."

Thor braces himself visibly. "Okay."

"What was that big fight about. The one you had with Odin. The one that made you leave home."

"Oh," says Thor, flicking his cigarette butt. "I didn't lock the back gate behind me when I came in that night."

"....That's it?"

"That's it."

"You and Odin...threw bottles at each other. You trashed the kitchen. *You ran away from home forever.*"

Thor's cheeks pink. "We got a bit carried away...."

But of course, it wasn't just about the back gate; Thor and Odin's relationship had been something of a powder keg for years. Any small altercation could have just as easily lit the match. The scene comes to Loki's mind's eye at once: Odin, demanding Thor go back out there and lock the gate. Thor, responding with an eye roll or a snide remark, as was his wont.

Don't talk to me in that tone of voice, boy.

Thor, like a proud young buck, bristling at being called *boy*.

Odin, digging in his heels. There was no room for backtalk in the army, and no room for backtalk in his house either.

The two of them locking horns because they're both exactly alike. Stubborn.

Loki has to laugh. Such a trivial thing - and look how it impacted the course of his life.

"So you're telling me... if you'd've closed the gate that night, we wouldn't be here."

Thor frowns. "Maybe. Maybe not. Hard to say how any universe will unfurl. Me and Odin was probably always gonna come to blows at some point or another." Thor squints into the distance. Under his breath he mutters, "The real trick will be not running away a second time."

Loki laughs again, and Thor looks at him.

"What?"

"Yeah. *That's* gonna be the real trick here. Out of everything else we're gonna do. The trick will be you and Odin getting along like civilized human beings so that you don't run off and have us wind

up in the same situation we're in now."

"It's a consideration," says Thor.

"Oh, come on. Odin wasn't *that* bad. You two could've worked it out if either of you stopped for a goddamn minute to listen to the other."

Thor sniffs. "Seems like I was always the one havin' to do the listenin'."

There he is, that petulant teenager Loki remembers so well. It's almost endearing, in a stupid way.

"D'you really think this is gonna work? This... *alternate universe* thing?"

"Depends," Thor puffs on his cigarette, "Whether or not you trust whoever wrote that card."

Loki does - he trusts Moo with his entire being. Or at least, he trusts that Moo had his best intentions at heart. But that doesn't mean Moo couldn't have jotted down a bunch of deranged made-up bullshit. Moo knew *something* about the Rig and its purpose, of that Loki is certain, but then again, Moo also didn't seem to realize that men and women have different kinds of genitals.

"That's besides the point," Loki counters. "How can you know whether or not this'll work? And *how* it's gonna work? You can't even tell me what the message reads, let alone how it's supposed to - to get us back in time!"

Thor's lips press unhappily. "You can still back out--"

"No, no," Loki forces himself to say. "I still want to try. I'm just kind of nervous about it, is all."

They fall silent for an uncomfortably long time. Loki takes out his inhaler and takes a puff on it.

"I want to sleep with you before we go. In case we don't make it."

Thor sputters on his cigarette smoke. “You do?”

“I want to know what it feels like to make love to you.” Loki says. “Unless you don’t want to-”

“No! No, I do. I do.” Thor is blushing furiously. “We can give it a shot. If that’s what you really want.” He pauses a beat. “Uh, just so I’m clear, you want me to.” He makes a nondescript gesture.

Loki thinks he knows what Thor is trying to convey, but it’s funny to watch him squirm.

“What.”

Thor is bright red. “*You know.*” He looks around to make sure they’re totally alone before he comes out with it quietly: “Be on top?”

“Oh! Be on top. Why didn’t cha just say so?”

“Well, I dunno, I’m new at this,” Thor says, defensive and embarrassed. At once Loki feels bad for teasing him; it’s true Thor has only slept with women before.

“Sorry,” Loki says, though he can’t help but smile. “Yes, Thor. That’s what I want.”

“Okay.” Thor clears his throat. “Cool, cool.”

“.....Is that okay?”

“Yes! Yes, it’s okay. It’s perfectly okay. Better than okay. I just wanted to make sure I knew. What we were doin’.” His leg jitters underneath him. “Not sure if I’d be any good at it though. Never been with another dude....”

“Well, you’ve done anal with girls, right?”

Thor exhales a puff of smoke. "No."

"*What?* You haven't? Why not?"

"I dunno. Seems like it would hurt?"

"I mean - yeah, it can hurt sometimes. But sometimes it can be really good." It's inconceivable to Loki that a straight man, like Thor, in a relative position of power, would never seek out anal at least from time to time. "Really? *Never?*"

"I couldn't ask Jane to do that."

"What about before Jane? What about with the brothel girls?"

Thor looks mortified. "No - I - *no.*"

"They would've let you do it, for sure. Probably wouldn't've even charged you extra for it."

"Loki." Thor scrubs a hand over his face. "*Jesus.*"

"What? They all have big fat crushes on you. Seems like half the women here do."

"They do?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake. You *have* to know how good-looking you are."

Thor flicks his cigarette butt. He doesn't smile. "I'm under no illusions about who I am to them."

Loki is getting sick of Thor's pity party. He sets the record straight:

“You know what? Those women came to purge you before they even knew about that stuff with Mr. Bee. Yeah, they did it to help me, but they also did it for you. They *risked their lives* for you. They know you're a good man, deep down. People like us - sex workers - we remember when we're treated with kindness. We don't always hate our tricks. Actually, I know for a *fact* the brothel girls liked when you came calling, cos they could count on you to be sweet to 'em. Fuck, Sigryn *still* came to help with the purge, despite what happened between you and Green. Why would she have done that, if she didn't think you were worth saving?”

“The girls talk about me?” asks Thor.

“Well...” Loki begins. That wasn't exactly the takeaway point he was trying to make here. “Yeah, but I mean - we talk about all the soldiers, not just you. It's like - a safety measure. If you're gonna get naked for some stranger, it helps to have an idea of what to expect.”

“Yeah, I get that, I just - Jesus. I didn't think I was getting scored.” Thor peers at Loki curiously. “What else did they say?”

“Uh...” Loki tries not to think of all the juicy details Sigryn had related to him. “Well? Honestly?”

“Yeah honestly.”

“Honestly, they say...” Loki tries to think of the best way to put it. “Honestly, mostly the girls like to talk about how you'd sometimes go down on them.”

“Oh.” blinks Thor. “My *God*.”

“What? That's good innit?”

“Maybe I did... like twice... but that was - that was *ages* ago-”

“Yeah, well, guess what, most soldiers here don't do it at all, so when one does, the girls are gonna fuckin' talk about it.” Loki pauses, then mutters under his breath: “For years, seems like.”

Thor is quiet for a minute as he soaks this in. He looks like he's at war with himself, at whether or

not to be horrified.

“...Did they say if I was any good?”

“Thor, it wouldn’t’ve mattered if ya slobbered all over ‘em like you was a dog licking gravy off a plate. It’s just - somethin’ nice. Girls appreciate it. Even if you sucked, they’d appreciate it.”

Thor grimaces, but now he’s laughing. “Please, God, tell me they didn’t actually use the word *slobber*.”

“What? What’s wrong with slobber? Slobbering isn’t always bad,” Loki teases, but then his smile fades. “While I’m being honest, Thor, that’s part of the reason Jane didn’t fit in with the girls here. The girls assumed you were doing that kinda stuff for her in bed, and that’s why you weren’t coming ‘round to the brothel no more, and they felt like she didn’t appreciate it. Like she was taking you for granted.”

“Taking me for granted?”

Loki nods. “Yeah. Cos she got the one soldier here who actually eats pussy.”

“Jesus,” Thor says with a wince. At first Loki thinks it’s because he tends to get frazzled when Loki talks so explicitly, but then Thor squints to the distance and says, “Jane didn’t like it when I went down on her.”

Loki shoves him. “That’s not the point! Are you even listening to me? The point is, there are people here who *do* want to sleep with you. Because they actually want to. Because they *like* you. Just because Jane didn’t love you or desire you doesn’t mean you aren’t desirable. Or loveable.” Loki pauses, swallowing before he comes out with it: “*I* desire you, Thor. I meant it when I said it.”

Thor stares at him a minute. His eyes glisten. Then he clears his throat.

“So.....What makes it good? When it’s good. For a guy.”

“Going slow. Using lube. I can get some at the brothel....” Loki can already visualize the knowing gleam in Mamma’s eye when he asks for some. “Or you can just slobber on me, I guess.”

“I’m being serious,” Thor says. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I trust you.”

“Well...I also want you to like it.”

“I’ll like it.” Loki flashes his best, most encouraging smile. “I know I’ll like it.”

"Can I make a request then?" Thor asks. "If we're doing this?"

I'm very open minded, is what Loki almost says, but he swallows it back. He doesn't want to be that person anymore.

“Okay, shoot.”

"Please be yourself," says Thor. "I know your past experiences have, uh, compelled you to act in a certain way.....but I don't want that. I want *you*."

It takes everything in Loki not to flinch.

“I’ll try,” he says.

Thor insists on coming with Loki to the brothel to talk to Mamma. Loki hasn’t the heart to tell him he probably won’t be allowed in, but nonetheless, he brings Thor to the brothel’s back entryway - the one which soldiers are not permitted to use - and knocks the particular knock against the back door.

As usual, it's Amora's eyes behind the slat when it opens.

"Hey," Loki greets.

"Hi Loki," Amora says. "Hi *Thor*."

Thor is visibly taken aback at hearing his real name, but he says nothing. He can't stand on much ceremony with these women, and he knows it.

"Uh - hi," he says.

"He'd like to talk to Mamma." Loki gestures to Thor. "If that's okay."

Amora appears unsure about letting Thor in, which is more or less what Loki expected.

"Let me check," she says. "Wait here."

She closes the door's slat. Thor and Loki stand on the step for some minutes before the door opens again.

"Follow me," Amora says, letting them both inside.

Thor is timid as he's led down into the brothel's basement. The women milling around stare openly at having a Commander infiltrate their private, sacred space - like white blood cells readying themselves to engulf a pathogen. Their eyes are wary, but Thor isn't exactly the most hated soldier in the Compound, and moreover Amora had clearly let them in. Thor must feel as out of place as he looks. Loki is used to moving through female dominated spaces - the brothel basement is a second home to him by now - but this is a world that's totally alien to soldiers. The men don't know a fraction of what goes on down here. And if they did, they might not sleep as easily at night.

Thor gawks at the growing alkanet bushes with particular interest. It's like he's never seen a living plant before.

“Commander,” Mamma greets, pleasantly surprised, as if she hadn’t been asked permission to let them down here. “Welcome. How are you feeling?”

“Hi - Mamma,” says Thor, stilted. He towers over her physically yet somehow seems smaller. He clears his throat. “Doing good. Better. Thanks.”

“I’m very pleased to hear that. You look better, if I may say so. What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if I could speak to you?” Thor’s eyes flit around to the women standing around staring at him like a circle of magpies. “...In private?”

“Of course,” says Mamma with a gracious sweep of her arm. “Right this way. Loki, kindly wait for us out here.”

When Thor comes out, he’s got an alkanet smear on his forehead. His eyes are puffy like he’d been crying. Loki is somewhat heartened to see that he’s not the only one susceptible to Mamma’s emotional barrage.

Loki waits until they’re back outside to ask: “Well? What did she have to say?”

“She said that when it’s time to go, we *go*. And to not look back.”

The following week, Thor comes home with some kind of pie. It’s got four mismatched candles on it of varying lengths. Loki’s heart melts when Thor presents it to him.

"You remembered?"

“Sigryn reminded me,” Thor says, sheepish, as he hands it to Loki. “Happy birthday.”

Loki accepts it with a sly, teasing smile. "Didja make this for me, Thor?"

"Ya right. I bought it from Bridgit. Well, I tried to. She gave it to me for free for some reason..."

"Ya, cos she thinks you're hot, you idiot, I told you."

"Oh." Thor blinks. Then he stands a little straighter. "*Well.*"

"Fuck off," Loki laughs. "Remember who you're Compound-married to."

"Yeah, the one wife here who can't cook."

Loki would be offended, except for Thor's playful, teasing tone, which Loki secretly relishes. Nonetheless, Loki's pride must be preserved, so he feigns offense and punches Thor in the shoulder.

"I'm doing my best, asshole! I'm learning! Haven't I gotten better since I got here?"

"Yeah. That's the scary part."

It's so strange to think that he won't have any more birthdays after this one. Stranger still to think that he'll live a life without Sunny Day in it, without the porn tapes, without Mad Dog or Rocco or Werner.....without any of it. It's funny - Loki used to always look forward to his birthdays because that was the only day he could be reasonably certain he'd have Sunny to himself. The two of them would go out for dinner and drinks as if they were actually a couple, instead of - well, what they really were. Sunny was extra doting last year on his birthday; he probably sensed Loki was on the verge of running. It was the last good time Loki remembers them having together.

Loki wonders if Sunny remembered it was his birthday today - wherever he is. He wonders if Sunny ever thinks of him at all anymore.

Loki can't wait to have that name wiped from his consciousness forever.

After a plain dinner of beans, bacon bits and rice, Thor lights the candles on the pie: two pink (for the decades, Thor says) and two yellow (for the individual years.) That makes twenty-two. Thor seems really pleased about this particular detail. It gives Loki the impression that he'd gone through some trouble to acquire the candles, which only makes Loki melt even more.

"Don't forget to make a wish," says Thor, as Loki is about to blow out the candles. Softer, he adds: "Make it count."

The pie is good - better than Loki could've ever made. It has a rich buttery molassesey taste. A shoofly pie, Thor calls it, which Loki has never heard of. Another Compound confection, made from the limited ingredients available through the commissary. Loki can tell Thor is struggling to eat it with his sore teeth; Loki winds up devouring most of it himself.

Afterwards, Thor pulls out the whiskey bottle for a few celebratory drinks. Loki usually doesn't like indulging Thor in his drinking, but he figures this vice, like Thor's smoking, won't really matter in the end.

"You know what I'd really like for my birthday?" Loki says, some drinks in. He covers Thor's hand with his own and looks at him pointedly.

"Oh," swallows Thor. "Tonight?"

Loki nods once, slow and deliberate. "I was gonna ask you anyway...but we don't have to -"

"No, that's cool, that's cool. We can do it tonight."

He is so painfully endearing sometimes. Loki falls in love with him all over again, missing teeth and matted hair and all. Even if they never left this world behind, even if this is the only Thor Loki would ever know, Loki would still love him.

Loki eyes him crookedly. "Are you shy, Thor?"

"It's been awhile," Thor admits, bashful. "And I'm a little -" he gestures to the emptied whiskey bottle. "So you can't make fun of me if I'm fast."

“Oh, so you can make fun of my cooking, but I can’t make fun of you being fast? How’s that fair?”

“Cos I’m the man of the house.”

“Pft. Some house.”

“Kay, fine. I’m the man of this shitty dilapidated shack.”

“Oh yeah? So what does that make me.”

Thor leans in close, and with too much sincerity, says simply: “My little wife.”

Loki laughs. “Shut up.”

“Now you’re the one blushing!” Thor grins. “Do I make you blush?”

“*Shut up.*”

“No, don’t shy away. C’mere.”

Thor has him ever so gently by the chin, feather light, yet Loki couldn’t pull away even if he wanted to.

“Why does that make you blush?”

Thor has a way of making Loki flustered - not even intentionally, most of the time. Thor doesn’t fully understand the effect he has on Loki, although in moments like these it’s probably pretty obvious.

“Cos you’re teasing me,” Loki says helplessly. “You’re making me feel silly.”

Thor leans in close. His voice is husky, warm, yet little more than a humid breath into Loki's ear: "What's silly about you and me, in a nice house, with a nice yard. Far, far away from here. Somewhere with warm golden summers, where trees and grass grow lush. We work hard and we've got money in the bank. I grill steaks on the barbecue. You keep a garden. We split a nice bottle of wine over dinner just 'cos. And then, after a long day, I take you upstairs and make love to you as a husband should. Do you think about it? Because I think about it." Thor's voice wavers. He fists Loki's sweater desperately. "I think about it *all the time*."

"I can't give you much in this world," Thor goes on, having pulled back, "But if this is what you want," he guides Loki's hand to rest on his chest, over his heart, "Then I want to give it to you."

Loki's mouth is almost too dry to form words.

"Let me shower first."

Loki comes out of the shower wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. Thor is there, sitting on their bed with his hands clasped in front of him. He straightens as Loki enters. He's nervous. Loki is nervous too. This isn't some guy Sunny sent him off with. This is Thor - his great love. His....whatever it was Mamma called him. This is what Loki's been longing for since he knew what sex was.

"Hey," says Loki.

Thor treats him to a shy little smile. "Hey."

Loki comes to stand before him, but he finds himself hesitant to take off his towel. It's not like he hasn't taken off his clothes before, but getting naked here and now makes Loki terribly anxious. At least tricking, johns knew what Loki had packing under his clothes. Even when Sunny dressed him as a girl, it was always obvious that Loki was male. But Thor - Thor is different. Loki isn't sure Thor could be made aroused when faced with the obvious fact that Loki has no lady parts.

Loki lets his towel fall anyway. Thor looks him over with something like wonder.

"You're really pretty," Thor offers.

“For a boy?”

“For a person.”

The earnestness in his face is hard to look at, so Loki sinks to his knees between Thor’s sturdy thighs. This vantage point is one Loki’s used to, and one in which he feels much less exposed. This way, he can do what he does best and not overthink what’s happening - or who he’s with. Loki reaches inside Thor’s sweats and pulls out Thor’s half-hard cock, making Thor shudder. Loki strokes it reverently. It’s a very attractive cock, as far as cocks go. Loki remembers thinking so when Thor had first let him do this. Nicer than he imagined would be, honestly. It’s thick and long, a nice tan colour, in a nest of honey brown pubic hair.

From there, it’s like Loki’s on autopilot. There’s a series of steps Loki executes when performing oral sex. He always starts slowly: rolling his tongue on the head, licking up and down the shaft. Only then does he take it fully into his mouth. Loki gains momentum and bobs his head vigorously, lips curled over teeth. When his jaw starts to ache Loki pulls off to attend to Thor’s balls, which he takes into his mouth in succession. Loki usually does this when he needs a break but can’t ask for one.

After the ache in his jaw subsides, Loki gets back to the main business. He wraps his hand around the base of Thor’s cock and dives in, treating Thor to the silky, pillowy softness of the back of his throat. Deepthroating was always his power move. It makes Thor groan and Loki is encouraged. Loki used to gag a lot more doing this. He’s even made himself throw up doing it. But, that was a long time ago, before Sunny taught him better. Loki knows now to keep one hand wrapped around the base of the man’s cock to keep him in check, and to only let go if he was explicitly instructed to do so. Loki does this because he would much rather deepthroat on his own terms than be face-fucked, which Loki finds suffocating. He allows viscous spit to drip down his chin; the noises he makes are obscene and sloppy. Men like it sloppy.

Thor rocks his hips forwards more insistently, seeking more of what Loki’s doing. His eagerness is sweet rather than pushy. Loki wants Thor to enjoy this experience fully, so Loki moans around his cock.

“If you keep going- “ Thor’s voice is like gravel. He tugs Loki’s hair in warning.

Loki pulls off with a wet pop. He allows a thin trail of saliva to connect his lip to Thor’s dick.

Thor looks absolutely wrecked. His every muscle is straining; his cock is curled upwards towards his belly.

“You’re really good at that,” he says with a little self-deprecating laugh.

Loki says nothing. He gets to his feet, intending to climb on the bed, but Thor stops him and instead takes Loki’s dick in his hand. It makes Loki startle.

“Sorry, my hand is cold.” Thor looks up at him. “Is this okay?”

Loki nods shakily. “Yes, it’s okay.”

Thor leans in and puts his mouth around it, making Loki jerk in shock. He’s so surprised that the actual feeling of Thor’s warm, wet mouth on his cock hardly registers. Loki’s hand instinctively goes to Thor’s head to rest on his ratty hair.

Thor rolls Loki’s limp dick in his mouth for some minutes. Clearly he has no idea what he’s doing. Loki kind of wishes he would stop.

Thor pulls back. “Sorry - is it not-”

“No, it’s good,” forces out Loki. “Thank you.”

“You could coach me, maybe? Give me some, uh, tips?”

Although Loki appreciates that Thor’s trying in the abstract, Loki actually doesn’t want to focus on his own pleasure right now. He never liked it when tricks tried to get him off. Sometimes they’d get upset or angry because Loki wasn’t physically aroused during their encounters - as if they hadn’t paid for Loki to be there.

Still, Loki can see how important this is to Thor. He doesn’t want to discourage him.

“Try - try folding your lips over your teeth.”

“Okay.”

“And uh - bob your head. Think of what feels good on you.”

Thusly instructed, Thor tries again. Loki can tell he's doing his best, but the result is much the same. Loki can't get hard.

Thor pulls off again. “How was that?”

“Better,” says Loki.

“Shouldn't you be...”

“I'm just nervous. It feels good. You're doing great. Thank you.”

Loki refuses to show it, but this is what he was afraid was gonna happen. This is more than he can handle. It would be so much easier to retreat into his little box and not have to think. The urge to please, to perform, is overwhelming. Sunny might as well be here, in the room with him, directing him what to do. Loki hates that he thinks of Sunny now, in this moment. A corrupting presence.

Thor looks uncertain. “I can try again...”

“It's okay, don't worry about it.” Loki smiles at him. His best, brightest smile. Before Thor can respond, Loki climbs up on the bed on his hands and knees. This position also has the added benefit of letting him hide behind his hair so Thor can't see his face.

“Uh - like this?” comes Thor's voice from behind.

No, on a flying trapeze. “Yes.”

“Okay,” squeaks Thor. He pats Loki's flank. His hands are still so cold. He traces Loki's tattoo with his fingertip curiously, as if he'd forgotten Loki had it. “Do you want me to, uh, warm you up first?”

“I’m warm. I got ready earlier in the shower.”

“Oh okay,” says Thor. “I would’ve-”

“Sure. It’s okay though.”

A pause. “Did you want me to wear a condom? I think I got a few somewhere-”

“It’s *fine*. Just do it already.”

“Just....put it in?”

Loki makes an impatient noise. He wants this over with.

“Yes, I can take it. Come on. *Fuck me*.”

Loki hears himself all of a sudden.

He wants it over with.

He wants *sex* with *Thor* to be over with. Sex. With Thor. The man Loki’s been waiting his whole life to be with. Loki wants it over with as quickly as possible. As if Thor were some....

....were some....

Trick.

And what’s more, Thor can tell.

"I think we should stop," says Thor.

Loki sits back on his heels, ashamed, humiliated, and disappointed in himself. He can already feel himself start to cry.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I want to, but I can't."

"It's okay."

"I *do* desire you. I do. More than anything. I wanted you to feel how much."

"It's okay, Loki."

"No it's not," Loki says angrily, rubbing away his tears. "They *stole* it from me."

"Stole what from you?" Thor soothes as sits next to Loki and pets his thigh. "Who did?"

Loki shakes his head. It's hard to put into words. But what Loki was robbed of was *sex*. Sex is supposed to be a pleasurable, fun thing you do with someone you love - or at least *like*. And that was stolen from him. Loki will never have a healthy normal sex life with Thor, or with anyone. Loki was robbed of excited, awkward teenage fumbling in the backseat of a car with a crush. He was robbed of a first time with someone his own age; robbed of fun, playful intimacy with a partner he trusted. Loki has never even had sex with someone he picked himself. The closest thing he'd ever had to a real boyfriend was Sunny, and isn't that the most pathetic thing? He can't even remember the last time he got himself off just because he wanted to. His body doesn't feel like his own. It was sold off piece by piece, to random strangers who went on with their lives afterwards, who either didn't know or didn't care about this precious thing they had torn from him. It makes Loki feel picked over, like a cadaver by a flock of vultures. There's nothing left of himself for Thor, and there's certainly nothing left of himself for himself. All Loki has is his defensive shell, his alternate persona: the Loki who begs for more when he's spit on. The Loki who's had his gag reflex bullied out of him. The Loki on the cover of Sunny Day's video tapes.

Because when the real Loki looks at Thor's cock, all he feels is dread. He doesn't want it anywhere near him, let alone inside him. The truth is, Loki hates sex. He hates what it has done to him. He hates how much suffering it has inflicted on him. And he wants nothing to do with it ever again.

“I can’t do this,” Loki says brokenly. “Not now. And I think.....not ever.”

Thor gathers Loki in his arms and holds him as Loki cries quietly. Loki doesn't explain any further than that, but he doesn't have to. Thor seems to understand.

“In another universe,” Thor whispers faintly into his ear, squeezing him tighter.

“Yeah,” Loki manages.

Another universe.

A cold snap hits the Compound. Temperatures dip below minus thirty, but it’s even colder with windchill. Loki has never experienced cold like this even all the times he was homeless. He’s certainly never lived anywhere where his eyelashes could freeze together. It makes him pine for the muggy summers of ██████████, out on the pier, when Loki would try and flirt with the girls at the lemonade stands for ice water and free popsicles.

He wears every piece of Jane’s outerwear he owns and it’s still not enough to ward off the chill. He watches Thor stuff his boots with wads of newspaper and does the same. He looks forward to working in the laundry because of how warm it is in there. Unfortunately, it’s the senior laundry women who are the ones who get to stay inside and do things like unload the dryers when the sheets are lovely warm bundles; Loki is still stuck on laundry pick up and delivery, which means spending an unfortunate amount of time trudging around outside. He feels cold all of the time. It’s hard to imagine Compound life being worse (Sigryn assures him that it most certainly can get worse - Loki just hasn’t been around long enough to be afflicted with a bedbug infestation. Loki thinks this is her way of making him feel better. It doesn’t.)

Compound life seems to halt, or at least slow, when it’s this cold. No one goes outside unless they absolutely have to. It feels dark, all the time. By now, the lukewarm cheer that had been generated by the Christmas and New Year's season has worn off completely. Everyone is grumpy, especially Thor. Thor’s teeth hurt him and that compounds his crankiness. He’s so snippy Loki feels like he’s walking on eggshells most of the time, just like how it was when he first arrived at the Compound.

The cold snap also means that more fuel is being burned throughout the Compound to keep the buildings heated....every building except Loki’s own cabin, that is. Thor is positively miserly with

their ration of propane. He's so stingy that he only lets Loki keep the heat on just enough so that their pipes won't freeze. That means coming home to a cold cabin with no hot water and having his fingers go numb as he prepares dinner. Loki goes days without showering because he'd rather be greasy than suffer an icy cold shower and then have his wet hair freeze to his head. He and Thor pile every blanket they can find on their bed to be able to sleep at night. Extracting himself from his little cocoon of warmth in the morning is an exercise in torture.

It's nice to snuggle close to Thor, at least, although Thor never really seems to be all that warm. Having his solid body press close to Loki's is the greatest comfort Loki has in this place. There's nothing more soothing than having Thor curl behind him, with a strong heavy arm slung over Loki's waist and his soft snores resonating in Loki's ear. In this attitude, it's obvious when Thor's got an erection. Loki can feel it, thick and weighty, against the small of his back. Loki feels compelled to do something about it, and yet he can't bring himself to move. And that makes Loki feel guilty, because isn't that what he's here for? It wouldn't really be a problem for Loki to tend to, if only Thor wasn't so stuck on the whole *authenticity* thing. Loki had blown him before, after all. He wouldn't mind doing it again if Thor would only turn his brain off and just enjoy it.

But, Thor never says anything about it, so Loki does nothing.

One night, Loki is already in bed when Thor comes in. Loki hopes Thor will spoon him from behind, as he often does, but this time Thor rolls Loki on his back and climbs on top of him, something he has never done before. Loki unthinkingly parts his legs to allow Thor to lie between them.

"Oh hey you," Loki says, fond, despite how prickly Thor's been lately. Loki can't help relishing Thor's attention, no matter how Thor chooses to give it. Hasn't it always been that way? Even when they were children, Thor would be a jerk, and Loki would adore him regardless. Thor could call him names and order him around, and Loki would still jump to obey.

And so, it's moments like these that truly make Loki's heart soar. Thor dips his head to nose at the juncture of Loki's shoulder and his neck like a puppy. Loki shivers, baring his neck to allow Thor access. They're both fully clothed - it would be impractical not to be, given the cold - which puts Loki at ease. It doesn't seem like it's sex Thor's after. All he seems to be seeking is closeness, which Loki is only too happy to provide.

Then Thor's palm comes to rest at the base of Loki's throat, and an instant, instinctive apprehension seizes Loki. He doesn't like hands anywhere near his neck. But Thor seems to be enjoying himself, and Loki's not exactly the type to vocalize when he's being made uncomfortable, so he says nothing. Not until Thor's hand slides up to rest right on Loki's throat.

"Thor, I don't like hands around my neck."

It's like Thor can't hear him. He caresses Loki's neck like he's mesmerized by it.

"Thor," Loki says again, more insistently. He squirms, but he can't dislodge himself from underneath Thor's bulk. Thor's once comforting weight is now stifling. And he isn't moving his hand.

Loki is really starting to feel anxious, even slightly panicked.

"Thor, let go of my neck."

Loki tries to pry it off, but he can't. Thor is gripping it now.

"Thor, *get off*."

The sharpness of Loki's voice is what finally cuts through Thor's fugue. Thor pulls back and blinks at him.

"Oh. Sure. Course," he mumbles, easing back.

As soon as he's able, Loki bounds out of bed and rushes to their bathroom. His chest is heaving. He rubs his neck and tries not to remember the way Rocco used to crush his windpipe so Loki couldn't keep begging for him to *stop*.

That was a long time ago, Loki tells himself, even though it really wasn't. He'd recently seen it for himself on Dunsch's television screen.

Then a horrible notion begins to fester in Loki's mind:

Maybe Thor isn't just being grouchy.

Maybe something is beginning to be wrong with him.

It all comes to a head on the night Sigryn shows up at their cabin door, bundled up in her faux-fur trimmed coat.

“Hey Loki. Hi sir,” she greets, after Loki had let her in. “I was wonderin’ if you had some extra propane you could possibly part with?”

“Sorry, Sigryn,” says Thor. “Supply is tight all round.”

Loki looks at him. “We have that whole other tank in the cellar.” He turns to Sigryn. “How much d’you need.”

“Just enough to last out the week,” Sigryn says in a small voice. “Maybe even a quarter tank-”

“We don’t have any to spare,” says Thor. “Sorry.”

“Red,” Loki speaks carefully, mindful of their bugged cabin, “Sigryn’s our *friend*. She helped us when we needed it.” Loki drops his voice to a low hiss. “Remember?”

Thor takes Loki by the arm. “This is what life in the Compound *is*,” he says, not ungently. “It sucks for everyone. It’s hard. At the end of the day we gotta look out for ourselves first.”

“And you wonder why this place is so goddamn miserable,” Loki spits, wrenching himself out of Thor’s grasp. “I’ll get the tank. Wait here-”

Thor stands over the cellar door hatch, blocking Loki’s way. “I don’t want *my* propane being used on Green. No offense, Sigryn, but you wouldn’t be having this problem if Green’d rationed yours out better.”

“With all due respect sir,” Sigryn returns evenly, “The reason we’re short is cos I missed a buncha work nursin’ Green after you knocked him out, and I spent our savings getting the doctor to fix his

busted-ass face. So that's why I'm here askin' ya. Sir."

Thor's nostrils flare as he absorbs this. "He shouldn't've provoked me," he says with a snarl. "What? He did. Green's a prick. *He* should be the one here, begging me for help. You deserve better, Sigryn. A man who can't provide for his wife ain't a real man."

"Maybe," Sigryn counters, voice wavering though no less firm, "But he's the man I'm stuck with. Lord knows he ain't perfect, but he takes care of me when I need it. So if he's gonna freeze then I guess I'll freeze alongside him."

"No reason why a pretty girl like you should haveta suffer. You should just sleep here, with us. There's room enough for three." Thor licks his lips; his mouth settles into a perverse leer. "I could give you girls somethin' new to talk about."

Sigryn is stunned. Loki is stunned too.

Loki shoves him. "What's gotten into you?!"

"Keeping our asses alive, that's what. I've been here almost twice as long as both of you combined. I know how it is. Mark my words, there's gonna be a shortage cos everyone's burning through the supply like idiots, and then none of us will have any and we'll *all* freeze. I've seen it happen. You think you've had it bad here? This -" Thor opens his arms demonstratively, "-Is luxury. This is the ritz. Trust me, you don't know what being cold is. You don't know what pain is. You should thank me for looking out for you. I've never let you go hungry, not once. You would've been eaten alive here if it weren't for me. And what do I get for my trouble? Not even a goddamn *fuck*."

"Red," Loki says, speechless.

Thor fists Loki's shirt. "Don't you - tell me - what to do with my propane. It's *mine*, it came out of *my* rations. And I ain't giving it up for nothing."

"Let go of me," Loki demands, but in truth he's now quite scared. "Thor. Let go."

"Hey, Red sir. Hey. It's cool. Chill. You wanna come to an agreement?"

It's Sigryn. Thor turns towards her as if he'd forgotten she was even there. He releases Loki, causing Loki to stumble on his feet. Thor cocks his head as he stalks towards her, curious.

And - as soon as he's in range, Sigryn slaps him. Hard. Right across the face, such that Thor reels. Sigryn shakes out her hand; her entire palm is slathered in alkanet, which she must've had in her coat pocket. Thor's cheek is smeared red where she'd struck him.

Thor straightens very slowly, registering the slap. He dabs at the substance on his cheek then looks at it.

His expression says it all.

Thor turns towards the kitchen wall, with his back to them both. He punches a hole right through the drywall, making Loki and Sigryn jump.

"Fuck!"

Thor stands there panting for some moments afterwards. He fists his own hair as if he wants to tear it out. His shoulders heave.

"Fuck," Thor says again, more softly. Broken. He covers his mouth with his hands. Neither Loki nor Sigryn move from where they're frozen in place, watching him.

"Loki. Sigryn. I'm sorry," Thor says thickly, still facing the wall. He gestures with one hand. "Loki, would you please get her the tank."

Loki rushes to obey. He opens the cellar door hatch in their kitchen floor, descends the ladder, and hauls up the tank. When he comes back up, Thor hasn't moved at all.

"Thank you," Sigryn whispers as Loki passes her the tank. She offers him a knowing, pitying look and kisses him fleetingly on the cheek.

"I think I need a smoke," Thor says after she's gone. This is their code phrase for *we need to talk*.

Loki closes his eyes. That means going back outside.

“Okay. I’ll join you. Let me get dressed.”

Thor has already lit up a cigarette by the time Loki gets outside. It’s viciously cold, and the wind whips Thor’s hair around to and fro. Thor’s hands are bare. His jacket’s not zipped and the flaps flutter erratically in the blistering wind. He isn’t even wearing a tuque. Loki, meanwhile, is freezing, and he’d bundled up in all his outerwear before coming out here.

“You need to stay at the brothel from now on,” Thor says.

“What? No - it’s okay. That was just a little - a little blip-”

“I’m not asking you. I’m ordering you,” Thor tells him flatly. “You’re gonna go back inside, pack your things, and be out of my cabin within five minutes.”

Loki’s mouth drops in outrage. “You can’t do that!”

“Yes I can. It’s my cabin,” Thor says. “Tell the brothel girls not to let me down into the basement again. I’ll contact you when I figure out a way for us to get out of here.”

“Fuck you. I ain’t leaving.”

“This isn’t up for debate,” says Thor.

Loki takes Thor’s face in his mittened hands. “I know this is cos you’re scared you’ll hurt me. I know you won’t. Okay? You’re not like that.”

It’s inhuman how fast Thor moves. He grabs Loki, wheels him around, and twists Loki’s left arm behind his back at an unnatural angle. At once, a sharp, intense pain radiates from Loki’s shoulder socket, and Loki lets out a high pitched cry. Thor’s got him in some kind of a hold. Loki cannot move without his arm screaming in pain.

Loki whines. “Thor - my arm-”

“Fight me off,” Thor says into the shell of Loki’s ear. His voice is strangely detached.

“I can’t,” Loki whimpers. “You know I can’t.”

“Try.”

Loki does but it’s no use; even the smallest movement exacerbates the pain. Besides, Thor’s a trained mercenary. Loki's no match against him.

"I can't, Thor, I can't."

Thor increases the torque on Loki’s arm, making Loki scream. The pain is unreal. Loki realizes that if Thor doesn’t stop, he’ll dislocate his shoulder.

“You don’t know what I’m capable of,” Thor says calmly. He doesn’t sound strained. He isn’t even breathing hard.

Thor lets up all at once and Loki lurches away, cradling his throbbing arm.

“Ow,” Loki says, stung.

“Do you see how fragile you are?” Thor says, still calm, although now there’s an odd simmering energy about him. “So fragile. Like a bird. Sometimes I look at you and I think - how easy it would be to break you, to crush your bones. The urge - sometimes the urge comes over me -” Thor turns his head skywards and closes his eyes. He flexes his hands, fingers splayed wide, and he grimaces, baring his teeth and sucking in air through them, “To find out how good it would feel to put my hands around your little neck - and have your nubile body squirm against me - as I snuff - you - out -”

Thor's flexed hands curl into fists for a few harrowing seconds before they relax at his sides. Thor

pivots his head downward to look back at Loki. His eyes are dull and yet fathomless. Loki notes, distantly, that his breath is not forming any condensation in the frigid air.

“You cannot stay here,” he murmurs. “You must go. Go now.”

Loki scrambles back inside with haste. His eyes blur with wetness as he fetches the old duffle bag from the cellar and begins throwing his meagre possessions into it. His arm still aches. His heart pounds.

“Shit. Fuck.”

As Loki heads back outside, he peers around anxiously for Thor, but there’s no sign of him. He’s gone - disappeared into the cold dark night.

Still spooked, Loki hustles his way across the Compound towards the brothel, keeping one eye over his shoulder for any sign of Thor. He’s deeply relieved when he reaches it, until he realizes something is very wrong: there’s soldiers milling around, blocking the entryway. Packs of women stand around huddling for warmth. People are shouting over the howling wind. Loki can’t even get close, let alone be allowed inside.

The brothel has been raided.

Black schedules a formal announcement at ten a.m. the following morning. The women are on edge as they congregate in front of the Central Block West. Black’s men are everywhere, armed and vigilant. Everyone is shuffling on their feet to ward off the extreme cold, which still has not abated.

Loki spots Sigryn, Amora and Brunhilde in the crowd and makes his way towards them. They all look haggard, like they hadn’t slept. Loki hadn’t slept much either, and not just because of the residual pain in his arm. He’d been forced to return to his cabin, but Thor wasn’t there, and Loki hasn’t seen him since.

“Soldiers came without warning,” Brunhilde tells him, though she keeps her face pointed forward stoically and doesn’t look at him. “Broke down the back door, tore through the basement. Went

straight for Mamma and arrested her. She went calmly, like a lamb. Like she was expecting 'em. She told us not to resist."

Loki doesn't want to ask yet he has to know: "Was cos - cos of the purge we did?"

"Who can say," says Brunhilde blearily. "It was probably a long time coming. We were always playing with fire."

Amora, who is standing beside her, sobs softly into her mittens.

"And the fuckers took our stuff too," Sigryn spits. "Our alkanet, oracle stones. Our birth control. And the abortifacients. What the fuck'll we do now?"

"Try not to get pregnant," says Brunhilde.

Sigryn huffs. "Easier said than done. The cold makes soldiers want to cuddle."

"What's gonna happen to Mamma?" Loki asks.

"Suppose we'll find out," answers Brunhilde bleakly. "Black never leaves us hanging long."

Right then, as if on cue, the clock strikes ten. The crowd hushes all at once as Black emerges out of Central Block. He's followed by that same corpulent officer who'd demanded that card trick from Loki. The two of them ascend the dais, but it's Black who steps up to the podium. He raps his finger against the head of the mic. The corresponding *tap-tap-taps* resonate through the Compound's outdoor speaker system. Black raises his hand to call for quiet. The crowd does, but the uneasy tension does not dissipate.

"Ladies, good morning," Black says into the podium's mic. His voice booms across the Compound yard. "Thank you for coming out on this nippy morning; I'll keep this short and sweet. I'm sure you have questions about what happened at the brothel last night, so I'm going to clear the air as best as I can so we can all get out of the cold and back to work as quickly as possible. To start off: yes, a raid was conducted on the brothel premises at approximately eleven p.m. last night as per my directive. I had been receiving reports of contraband being trafficked through the brothel for some time, and after a lengthy investigation, I have confirmed that these allegations are accurate. All medicines are to be acquired through the dispensary, ladies, I know y'all know this."

The crowd murmurs unhappily.

“Yes, I know, you were all quite fond of Madame Margit. She has been something of a fixture here in the Compound for many, many, many, years. Unfortunately, the evidence is indisputable: she has been the chief ringleader of this little smuggling operation. For her role in the trafficking of drugs and other illicit materials, I have had Margit taken into custody. She has been undermining our operations here for far too long. And that is something I cannot allow.”

“Let us see her!” Brunhilde shouts. The women murmur in agreement.

Black’s gaze cuts over the crowd like a scythe. “Who said that?”

Brunhilde’s eyes go wide, but she nonetheless raises her hand.

“You have a question? Come forward, girl. Come up.”

Black's men slice through the crowd and guide Brunhilde forwards by her elbows until she’s right at the foot of the dais.

Black peers down at her, hawkish. “What’s your question, bella.”

“We want to see her, sir,” says Brunhilde, tilting her head up. ‘We want to know that she’s still here.”

And not on the Rig, is what’s left unspoken.

“Oh, she’s here. I assure you. You’ll see her,” Black says, more at Brunhilde than into the mic. His gaze is so intense that even Brunhilde, formidable though she is, visibly withers.

Black resumes speaking into the mic. “Now. I don’t consider myself an unreasonable man. I know how much you women value your little....superstitions. That’s why I’ve turned a blind eye to it for as long as I have. But now I see that it has been distracting you from your purpose here.” Black’s

voice is beginning to rise, and his breath comes out in thick clouds of condensation. "It's time to grow up, ladies. It's time to stop playing make-believe. Your little trinkets, your little weeds and rocks - they are a False. Consolation." His voice is a sharp bark now. "They cannot save you. *Work* will save you."

Black collects himself as he continues: "Henceforth the brothel will be under new management. I'd like to introduce a new commander: Commander Pink." Black gestures at the portly officer next to him on the dais. The officer beams down at the crowd with a smug expression plastered on his porcine face. "Effective immediately, Pink will assume command of the brothel and all the workers therein. He's a fruit so you ladies don't have to worry about him badgering you for free fucks. He'll be taking care of all y'all from now on. Witchcraft paraphernalia of any sort is now classed as section fourteen-b contraband. I am giving you one day's grace to relinquish the last of what you have on hand to Pink. And I would advise that you take the opportunity, ladies, because starting tomorrow I will not be exhibiting any leniency on this matter."

The crowd erupts as everyone begins shouting all at once. Black raises his hand again for silence, but it does nothing this time. Black shrugs.

"If you have further concerns, I invite you to direct them to Commander Pink," he says into the mic. "This briefing has concluded. Thank you and good day."

Loki squeezes his jar of alkanet in his pocket.

Within the next few days, the cold lets up, but the mounting tension in the Compound doesn't.

Loki still hasn't seen Thor since the night of the brothel raid. Loki hates to admit it, but it's a relief to not have him around. Loki doesn't have much defense left, especially now that Mamma has been arrested. There's nowhere for Loki to run to: no one who could take him in. With Pink's new rules, Loki couldn't even enter the brothel unless he was prepared to trick. And the thought of going back to tricking - even if it would protect him from *Red* - is too repulsive for Loki to entertain.

Still, he wishes he knew where Thor was. It makes him worry.

Loki aches for Mamma, for her guidance, comfort and wisdom. She'd been his rock, his security. There's been no sign of her, either. He worries for her too.

Loki busies himself with the drudgery of daily laundry work. As he makes his way through the yard one morning, he notices a team of laborers hauling out trash bags full of stuff and emptying them at the base of what looks like another pyre. Other labourers are dousing the firewood in what must be kerosene. Armed guards stand around and watch.

Loki keeps moving. He spots both Sigryn and Brunhilde outside the canteen, in the back alley, chatting quietly amongst themselves and smoking.

“Pink’s a pig,” Brunhilde sneers, when Loki asks. “Worse than a gutter pimp. That fuckwit won’t get us our birth control. Says there ain’t enough to go around, but I know he’s lying.” Brunhilde spits on the ground. “We’ll all be pregnant by spring. That’s what Black wants. He wants us pregnant and nursin’ and too busy raisin’ an army of soldier-brats to make a stink. Fuck. The girls are gonna get desperate. It’ll be back to coathangers and drinking bleach.”

“What about our mule?” asks Sigryn.

Brunhilde shakes her head. “Too much heat. Pink’s watching us. He’s had our brothel rooms bugged.”

“Fuck,” groans Sigryn. “I’m gonna get knocked up so fast.”

"Green's still pushing for a kid?" asks Brunhilde.

"Yeah."

“The fuck why?”

“Fuck if I know. Some bullshit about proving his *manly virility*, probably." Sigryn looks away. Her face turns wistful, and sad. “Ya know what the kicker is? I’ve half a mind to give him one...if we were anywhere else. Anywhere but here.”

"Can you avoid him during your fertile window?" says Brunhilde.

"Yeah, I tried, and I *still* got knocked up two months ago. Besides, Green can tell something's up when I suddenly get super into anal for a week. He's dumb but he ain't *that* dumb."

Brunhilde wrinkles her nose. "Ugh, I hate anal."

"I'd rather do that than give head. With anal at least I don't really have to *do* anything."

"Try soaking a sponge in lemon juice and putting it up your pussy. The sponge'll absorb the cum and the acid acts as a spermicide. It ain't the best method but it might help. You can also use the rind as a cervical cap."

"Great," Sigryn grumbles. "I have to turn my vag into a goddamn fruit cup."

"How's Thor been," Brunhilde suddenly asks Loki.

"Oh," Loki doesn't really want to insert his own troubles into this particular conversation, "He's. I dunno. I haven't seen him in four days. Not since the night of the raid. I dunno where he went."

"It's coming back, huh," Brunhilde says, in a manner that suggests Sigryn had already told her about the incident with the propane.

"Yeah," Loki says. He's too ashamed to tell them what happened afterwards, outside their cabin, when Thor had nearly torn his arm clean off.

"Shit. Sorry, mate." Brunhilde pats his shoulder sympathetically. "We tried."

Loki ducks his head. He doesn't want to think about it.

"What d'you think's going on in the yard?" he says instead.

"Why, what's going on in the yard?" asks Sigryn.

"Looks like they're building another pyre or something," says Loki. "Like they did on New Year's."

The three of them make their way back out towards the central yard to take a look.

"It's a pyre all right," says Sigryn, confirming what Loki had suspected. Then her mouth twists in outrage, "*Hey*, it's all our shit from the brothel!"

"They're gonna burn it," Brunhilde says.

"No birth control my ass," seethes Sigryn. "I bet it's all in there. That's why Black's got soldiers guarding it. So we don't try to dig around and salvage it."

"They're gonna burn the stockpile of alkanet too," notes Loki, his heart sinking, although he isn't surprised. It's not like he expected Black to give it back.

Sigryn turns to Brunhilde. "Do you think we could distract 'em, maybe? There's only like three guards. We could get a few more girls to help. Lure 'em away somehow. Men are idiots....no offense, Loki. Or we could just storm it, they couldn't stop us all...."

Brunhilde has gone unusually quiet. She stares out at the pyre, unblinking.

"Brunhilde?"

"Never seen 'em build a pyre like that," she says softly, as if to herself.

"A pyre like what?" Loki asks.

"With a stake in the middle."

The three of them look at each other. None of them say anything.

“Never mind,” Brunhilde whispers. “It’s nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“I - I should get back to work too,” Sigryn stammers. “I’ll see you guys later.”

The two of them disperse hurriedly. Loki is left standing there alone, mind whorling.

Surely she can’t be implying....?

Loki is already marching over before he even registers what he’s doing. He’s recognized one of the soldiers standing guard.

“Hey. Spud. *Hey.*”

Spud turns around, eyebrows raised. He’s got a cigarette dangling from his lip.

“Well, well, well. Look who suddenly deigns t’talk to me. Highness.”

“What’s going on? What is this?”

“Looks to me like a buncha shit in a pile.” Spud eyes Loki curiously. “Don’t tell me you’re one of dem witches too? I thought that was women’s shit.”

Loki points to the pyre. “Why’s there a beam in the center like that.”

“I got a beam for you right here, baby.”

Loki turns on his heels. “Fuck you, Spud.”

“Whoa, whoa. Wait. Wait a sec. Loki - wait.” Spud reels Loki back in with a hand around Loki’s arm. “You gotta tell me somethin’ first. Rumor is you did some pornos before you got here. Is that true?”

Loki is past the point of caring who knows it. “Yeah.”

“You did? What kinda pornos?”

“All kinds,” Loki says. He feels so tired, so defeated, and he can hear it in his own voice. “Are you gonna laugh at me, Spud.”

Spud ducks his head and scuffs his boots in the snow. “Naw, I wasn’t ‘bout to laugh at cha. I was just fixin’ to know if it was true.....” His voice trails off. He rips off his tuque, scratches his scalp vigorously, then pulls his tuque back on. “Yer secret’s safe with me. Okay? I won’t tell no one. Promise.”

“I don’t care what you do. I just want to know what’s going on here,” Loki says. “C’mon, Spud. I was honest with you. You wanna hear about all the porn I did? I’ll tell you if you want.”

“Naw, naw,” says Spud. “You ain’t gotta do that, I was just teasin’...”

“*You’re* the one who brought it up. What’s your kink? Bet I’ve done it. I’ve done it all. Boy-girl, boy-boy, threesomes, foursomes, hardcore-”

“Okay okay. I get it-.”

“Or is it the t-girl stuff you like? Styled right I make a pretty convincing girl. Minus the tits.”

“Loki,” Spud hisses. “Shh.”

“Why’re you embarrassed? I’m not fucking embarrassed. I don’t care. I’ll tell the entire Compound. Over the announcement system, even.”

“I ain’t embarrassed, yer just - yer just talkin’ real loud.”

“Spud,” Loki pleads, “Why does the pyre have a stake.”

Spud's lips purse unhappily. "I really can't say." His voice drops to an apologetic whisper as he leans in close: "But I think it'd be best if ya stayed home tonight."

The contrite look in his eyes is confirmation enough. Loki rips out of his grasp and sprints away, paying no heed to Spud calling after him.

Loki has to do something. He has to find Thor.

Central Block. Either Central Block East or West. Thor's gotta be in one of them.

Loki rampages into the sterile, institutional halls of Central Block East first. He has no idea where to begin looking, so he picks a hallway at random and starts sprinting down it. He pauses here and there to peer in the door windows, but Thor is nowhere to be found. Loki ascends the stairwell to level two.

"Hey! You there! Stop!"

Loki glances over his shoulder. At the end of the hall is a pair of soldiers - Black's, most likely. Unthinkingly, Loki bolts in the other direction, away from where there's coming at him.

"*Stop!*"

Loki only charges faster. He rounds a few corners, trying to lose them, but when he turns a bend there's another soldier right in front of him. Loki halts in his tracks and puts his hands up; there's no point in trying to resist this.

"What're you doing in here?" says one of the two soldiers who'd chased him.

"What am I doing." Loki says, panting. He tries to think. It's not an unreasonable question. *What the hell am I doing.* He wishes he had his laundry sack with him - that might've made a passable excuse.

“You know Central Block East is off-limits to labourers.”

“Yes, I know, sir. I’m sorry,” Loki says harriedly. His heart is pounding so hard. “I got lost.”

"Lost? Then why're you running?"

"I panicked," says Loki truthfully.

One of the soldiers frisks him up and down over his clothes. He checks Loki’s pockets too, and pulls out the small jar of alkanet that Loki has taken to always carrying around.

"Contraband," says one of the officers. “Take him outside, deal with him."

"Wait - sir, I think this is Red's boy. From the laundry."

"So it is. Better take him to Black.”

Black is clearly exasperated when Loki is brought into his office.

“You again. Can’t you stay out of my hair for one goddamn week.” Black skims over the paper his officer had handed him. "Trespassing, huh. Whatcha trespassing for.”

Loki keeps his eyes fixated on a patch of wall behind Black’s head.

“Nothing? Nothin’ to say for yourself?”

Still, Loki keeps quiet.

“The ol’ silent treatment, huh? That’s fine, you’ll have to work a lot harder than that to hurt my feelings.” Black makes some notes on the page. “I’m issuing you twenty demerit points for the trespassing. For disobeying my officer’s direct order, fifty. And for the contraband - ten.”

Black leans back in his desk chair with a sigh. He throws down his pen.

“I know this is about that woman, so you might as well come out and ask what you came here to ask.”

“What’re you gonna do to her.”

Black’s face is unreadable. “Why don’t you tell me what you think I’m gonna do.”

Loki shifts his weight on his feet. He’s starting to lose steam. It’s one thing to harbor a suspicion like this; it’s another thing to accuse Black of it right to his face. Especially when it’s something this....inconceivable.

“I don’t want to say, sir.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because - because it’s too awful sir.”

“Too awful? For *me*? It must be very awful indeed. Or, you must not think *I’m* that awful, in which case I’m flattered.” Black rolls his desk chair over to one of his many filing cabinets. “What’s your number again? 2-1 something? I should have it memorized by now, Jesus.” He opens the drawer, peruses the contents therein, and pulls out what must be Loki’s file. He rolls his chair back over to his desk and wags the file folder in front of Loki’s face. “Ya see how fucking thick this thing is? No wonder I’m going grey.” He slams it on his desk. “Well, if you ain’t got nothin’ more to say, then we’re through here. I’m going to issue you a further twenty demerit points for pissing me off. That’s one hundred demerit points. Enough for a good flogging if you weren’t Red’s boy, but since you are, I’ll let you off with three nights in the Pens-”

“Are you gonna *burn* her?”

Black's lips curl, almost coy, and his eyes glint. "Mm, there it is. I must say, that *is* awful. Even...medieval. You don't really think I'm capable of something like that, do ya?" Black stares at Loki, piercing, before turning back to his papers. "Now, as I was sayin' before I was interrupted, three nights in the Pens for you, starting...hmm. Let's start you off tomorrow night. Tonight I've got a special little show planned for out in the yard, and I'd hate for you to miss it."

Loki can feel his eyes sting. "You *are* gonna burn her."

"This is what happens when you play witch, Loki." Black opens his hands. "I'm just embracing the fantasy."

"Sir." Loki is aghast. "You *can't*."

"I can't? Huh. That's funny, because I do believe I can do as I please."

"It's - inhumane. It's -" Loki doesn't even know what to say. "It's evil."

"And you had yourself brought here to proposition me? To save her? Right? That's what this is?"

Loki blinks. "What?"

"You think you're the first whore to try and broker a deal with me? There are easier ways to go about this than having yourself arrested, but I appreciate the lengths you're willing to go to get a private audience. So go on. Let's have it."

"You....want me to proposition you, sir," Loki says. "Me."

Black checks his watch. "Look. I'm a very busy man. I don't appreciate my time being wasted-"

"Okay! Okay." Loki's mouth feels like ash. He can hardly believe the turn this is taking. "If you release her, sir, we can....we can come to an arrangement-"

Black clicks his tongue. "Come on, now, son. I know you can do better than that. Let's see those

acting chops. *Proposition me.*"

Loki closes his eyes to rally himself. When he speaks again, it's *the voice* that comes out: "You release Madam Margit," he begins, leaning forward, his palms on Black's desk, "And before you send me to Duntsch, I'll give you the greatest fuck of your life. I'll fuck you so good you'll forget I'm a boy. I will do whatever you want." Loki lowers his voice even deeper, sultry, to deliver his signature line. "I'm very open-minded."

"That's more like it," Black purrs, though his face remains unsmiling. "I should tell you, Loki - being the man of honour that I am - I have compiled quite the dossier on Ms. Margit, and regardless of how good a fuck you may or may not be, her infractions are too grave and too numerous for me to ignore any longer, and so she must be neutralized." Black's voice is gentle, even tender: "I've already signed the executive order. It is done, Loki."

Loki closes his eyes. *Mamma. Oh, Mamma.*

"Then...I'll do it for your mercy sir. Give her humane death. By firing squad. Or...or a lone gunman. Not like this."

Now Black is visibly surprised. Even perplexed. He looks at Loki like he'd never seen anything like him before.

"You just won't quit, will you?" he muses, as if to himself. "I will say this about you, Loki - you've certainly kept things interesting around here. I should almost thank you for that, because there is nothing I loathe more than being bored."

Black slaps his knee.

"Alright, son. Tell ya what. I'll take you up on your offer. On one condition."

"What's that, sir."

"This offer of yours - this earthshaking fuck you're promising - well, I ain't a very patient man." Black smiles, rueful, though it's clearly put-on. "What I wanna know, is, what're you prepared to do today. Right now."

Loki's voice is small. "Now?"

"Yes, now. Who knows when it'll be time for Duntsch to get you?"

The truth is, Loki didn't count on *now*. He was counting on escaping this timeline with Thor, somehow, before his deliverance unto Duntsch - and the deal he's brokering - could come to pass.

"You're hesitating, honey, why do you hesitate." Black says, eyes narrowed like they're slicing right through him. "You ain't faking me out, are ya."

If Sunny were here, Loki might've thanked him for all those vicious fucks he'd been subjected to. If Loki could slut it out for Rocco on set, he could do it now. One last hurrah before he leaves this universe behind forever. This fuck will probably be the worst of them all, though.

Nothing about this world matters.

Loki begins shrugging off his jacket. "Now's fine. How do you want me, sir."

"Wait. Stop undressing," Black commands. "You're gonna want a drink first."

He gets up, goes to his small liquor cabinet and pulls out a bottle and two shot glasses. He comes over to the other side of his desk where Loki is standing.

"I ain't usually one to drink during this early in the day, but I think today is a special occasion....."

Loki isn't in the mood for this. Knowing that Mamma will be executed regardless of what he does makes him feel raw. He just wants this over with.

"I'm good, sir," Loki says, when Black goes to pour his.

"You sure? You seem a little tense."

“I loosen up real fast,” Loki says.

Black cracks a sly, knowing smile. “Well, if you don’t mind.”

Black tips his head back and downs his shot, then slams the shot glass down on his desk. And Loki decides to go for it. He carefully tucks his real self into that safe little box inside his own mind and reaches for Black’s fly.

“Whoa whoa, calm down there kiddo,” Black laughs, grabbing Loki by both of his wrists to stop him. “So eager.”

Loki doesn’t bother trying to wrench out of Black’s grasp. In a smoky voice, he says, “I wouldn’t want to take up too much of your time. You’re a busy man, as you said.”

Black soaks this in. He cocks his head with that same curious, even slightly amazed expression as before.

"You’re being serious. You would do this for that woman." Black’s eyes are searching. “Why.”

Black’s stare makes Loki feel more naked than if he’d finished taking off his clothes. It’s because Black talks like he already knows the answer to his questions when he poses them.

Loki does the only thing he can think to do: deflect.

“Maybe I miss my real mommy,” he says, voice pitched high, like a child. “Maybe I have mommy issues.”

“Mmm, I’ve no doubt that you do, but I don’t think it has to do with that. I think it has more to do with the fact that you little witches have been up to some mischief under my nose. But you wouldn’t know anything about that. Wouldja.”

“I don’t know jack shit sir,” Loki says silkily.

“Hm. Must just be my imagination, then. Making it seem like Red’s changed in the month since the last new moon.”

It takes everything in Loki to keep his face neutral. He pulls his wrists free from Black's grasp. “How do you want to fuck me, sir.”

“Sir,” Black chuckles. “That sounds so formal. Hmm. Well, I ain’t your daddy, nor do I wish to be. And Black, well. That’s just boring.” He strokes his beard thoughtfully. “Black, black, black. What if we shortened it. Made it a bit more friendly-like. What about.....just Bee. Mr. Bee.” His eyes glint. “Bee for Black.”

It takes several seconds for Loki's brain to catch up to what was just requested of him. *Mr. Bee*. Loki’s mouth hangs open at the sheer ingenuity of Black’s sadism. Black is, without question, the most cruel, vicious, callous husk of a human he has ever met. Loki is speechless.

“Come on, now, son. You were so seductive a minute ago. I thought you were a *professional*,” Black enunciates this last word like a bark; there’s an undercurrent of seething rage in his voice that’s frightening. Loki suddenly realizes, with terrifying clarity, the extent of Black’s hatred for him.

And yet, Loki must proceed. He knows he must. He does not bother to hide his revulsion, nor the hot tears of humiliation coursing down his cheeks. Let Black not be deprived of the pleasure of seeing his torment's effectiveness. That's clearly what he's after. If Black wants to watch Loki hate every second of this, then that's what he'll get.

“Alright, Mr. Bee, you got me cryin’ like you wanted,” Loki forces out, biting, as he draws closer to Black. “Does my misery get you off? Does it turn you on to make me suffer?” Right into Black’s ear, Loki breathes hotly: “I gotta say, I’ve met some sick fucks in my time, but this - this takes the cake.”

"What would you say to him," Black asks, soft and curious.

"What would I-" Loki is literally taken aback. "What would I say?"

"Yes. If he were me."

Loki is at a loss. What would he say? To the man who *molested* him? The man who had groomed him, who had robbed him of his childhood innocence, who had made Loki believe that he and his mom would be made homeless if he said anything about what was being done to him?

As Loki thinks about it, it dawns on him that he will never escape Mr. Bee. Even if he and Thor did manage to go back in time, it wouldn't be far enough to undo what Mr. Bee did. That will always be a part of his life's story.

Loki considers lying. Black doesn't deserve to have access to this part of him. And yet, when he opens his mouth, what comes out is devastatingly honest:

"I guess I'd ask him.....I'd ask him.....what's *naturally provocative* about a seven year old."

Black rests his hand on Loki's shoulder. "I'm sorry that happened to you, Loki."

And - the most unsettling thing is - Black actually sounds like he means it.

Loki rubs his tears away with the back of his wrist and shakes Black's hand off his shoulder. "Sir, I don't want to play this game. Can we just fuck. Please. Can we just fuck-"

Loki realizes all at once what's happening here: Black's toying with him. He never intended on taking Loki up on his offer. He's amusing himself, goading Loki to see how far he could take this. This is the worst humiliation Loki has ever felt. The worst trick. Maybe even worse than if they'd fucked.

Black cocks his head. "In what universe do you think I'd want you."

"I know you enjoy hurting me, sir," Loki says.

In one swift motion, Black backhands him, *hard*, right across the face. Loki reels, knocked off-balance, his head swimming.

“You’re right.” Black sucks in air through his teeth. “I did enjoy that.”

The sucker punch that lands next drops Loki to the ground, wheezing.

“C’mon now, son,” Black grabs Loki by the arm to haul him up. “Actin’ like you’ve never got your ass beat before.”

Now that the initial shock of the attack has worn off, the pain is starting to register. Loki is too dazed to do anything but curl his arms around his head defensively as Black hits him, again and again and again, sending Loki careening backwards into the filing cabinets. Loki drops to the ground and Black crouches over him. His hands are around Loki’s neck, crushing his windpipe, making Loki thrash in panic.

“You and your little *bargains*,” Black hisses. “The goddamn audacity. You think you can do anything to sway me? This is *my* Compound. You have nothing to offer me which I cannot take.”

Loki’s vision spots. He struggles against Black’s ironclad grasp, trying in vain to pry Black’s hands off his throat, but he’s got no air. He can’t breathe, he can’t breathe.

Black lets up, all at once. Loki is left on the floor gasping for breath, light-headed and woozy.

"The show’s about to start,” Black says, dulcet. He’s now standing by his office window and peering through the blinds. “You best be gettin’ on out to the yard.”

Loki rolls onto his stomach, then slowly pulls himself up on all fours. His ribs hurt, his face hurts, his ears are ringing. He can still feel the ghostly pressure of Black’s hands around his neck. Dizzily, Loki pulls himself to his feet, using the wall for balance so he won't faint. There’s blood dripping from his nose; his lip is busted open too. He knows from experience he’ll be getting a black eye.

You will not live to see another morning, he thinks.

.....But he also says it. Aloud. To Black’s face. As if an outside omniscient, omnipotent force has compelled him to do so. His voice is only a croak, but he definitely says it.

Black stares at him. Now he is the one rendered speechless.

Loki straightens himself as best as he's able, and with as much dignity as he can muster, limps out of the office.

Outside, chaos is barely being held at bay.

News of the execution has broken across the Compound. Labourers, soldiers, even children have all congregated in the yard, eager for a spectacle. The women are shouting. Soldiers are standing guard over the proceedings somewhat uneasily; they shove the mob of women back when they push too far forwards. Everyone is yelling and jostling each other. Shots are fired in the air to maintain order, to little avail. This is not a normal execution. This is....barbarism.

Mamma is brought out just as Loki reaches the scene. At the sight of her the women become frenzied, but they can do nothing against the soldiers forcing them back. Mamma is escorted up to the stake, atop the piles of stuff from the brothel, and is handcuffed to it by the two soldiers restraining her. She does not resist, nor does she beg for mercy, but the terror on her face is very, very real. Loki can barely discern her voice over the pandemonium:

"My children - do not be afraid. This story is not yet finished. Trust in the Great Mother. She has it written -"

The women wail in response. From there, everything is a blur. Loki can hardly see through his own watering vision. It's all happening so fast.

It's then that Loki notices Thor there, among the soldiers. Helping to light the pyre.

"Stop! Thor! What are you doing?!"

Thor can't hear him from where he is. Loki can barely hear himself. And even if Thor could hear him, it doesn't seem like he'd listen to anything Loki had to say.

As soon as the pyre is lit, the flames quickly lick up the kerosene-soaked firewood until they're right at Mamma's feet. Then Mamma really starts to scream.

"-My children, seek out that which is hidden. She has it written, the story is written -"

"Shoot her!" someone shrieks. "For the love of God, shoot her!"

Mamma is engulfed by flames.

The women keen at the base of Mamma's burning pyre into the night. They slather the last of their alkanet on their faces and tear at their hair. They fall to the ground, weeping, and sing songs of lamentation. They scream together as one, as their beloved Mamma had taught them.

Loki clings to his sisters in the filth of the Compound yard and screams alongside them. He screams until his voice is nothing but a hoarse wail. He screams until his vision swims and his heart thrums erratically in his chest.

All the while Red stands there, silhouetted against the flames, with his assault rifle clutched against his chest. Green is there too. And Grey, and Blue, and the rest of the Compound's Commanders. They stand between the women and the pyre and simply....watch. Their faces are dark, backlit against the fire, and expressionless. Smouldering red-hot embers cascade in whorling flurries all around them. They are as still and as unmoved as golems.

As the hours waste away the flames dwindle. The skies become overcast and it begins to sleet. The women peel off in ones, twos and threes, having exhausted themselves with their anguish.

Loki picks himself off the ground shakily. He's freezing, soaked through with wet snow. His entire body aches from the beating he took from Black earlier. The smoke from the fire has made his eyes sting and his lungs burn. His vocal chords are as raw as an open wound. He's as wrung out as if he'd been purged himself. But he isn't done yet.

Red watches him approach with a blank expression. Once Loki is mere inches away he screams, as loud and as angry as he has ever screamed, right in Red's face. Red stares back at him without blinking.

“You gonna wring my neck like you said? Crush my bones? Snuff me out?”

Red does not answer. Nor does he move, or react. He just watches.

“*Come on*. I know you want to. You want to hurt me. Right? Put me in my place?” Loki bares his teeth. “Why don’t you be *Red* and I’ll be Sunny Day’s best porn star, and we’ll have the most epic fuck of our lives.”

Still, Red only stares back at him. Unflinching, but also steadfast. And very alert.

“Come on, what’re you waiting for?!” Loki shoves him in the shoulder. “Fuck everything! Fuck the future you promised me! Fuck the life we should’ve had together!”

Loki begins to break down. He can’t reach him. Thor is gone. Loki has lost him, and they’ve lost this battle. He sinks to his knees at Red’s feet.

“Shoot me. Please just shoot me. I can’t take this anymore. I want it to end. I’m *tired*. I don’t want to keep going. I’m begging you. If there’s any *Thor* left inside of you, you would do this one last thing for me.”

This, Red seems to understand. He takes aim with his assault rifle, point blank range.

Loki squeezes his eyes closed. He thinks of his mother.

And waits.

And waits.

And - nothing happens. Loki cracks open one eye.

Tar-tears are coursing down Thor’s cheeks, staining his face black. He’s lowered his rifle.

"I'm sorry," he says, confusedly. "I - I can't -"

Of course Loki would be denied this one act of mercy. He'll never leave this world behind. He's trapped here, just as Thor said. There is no escape from Black, and there is no escape from Sunny or Rocco or any of the horrible things that have ever happened to him over the course of his life. Loki should've known better than to believe he'd ever have a happy ending.

The storm is picking up. The snow, heavy and wet, is growing in intensity with every passing moment.

"Then," Loki says, numb, "I suppose that we are finished."

Loki is having a nightmare.

His mom is on the couch and the couch is on fire.

She was cremated and Loki doesn't have her ashes. Loki lost them when he was homeless and his backpack was stolen. The person who took it probably threw the urn in the garbage. Because why would you not? The ashes of some junkie prostitute? Trash - just like the few photographs and mementos Loki had in there. All rotting in some landfill. That's what happens to people like Loki. They wind up in a gutter somewhere, or dead in some seedy motel. They get used up and discarded.

Loki screams in the dream. And maybe in real life too.

At least his mother is dead as she's burning.

Loki bolts awake all at once. Thor has burst into their bedroom.

"Get out!" Loki shrieks. "Get out!"

Thor ignores this. He rushes to the bedroom air vent, crouches down, and rips the grate off with his bare hands - screws and all. He reaches inside and tears out the bug by the wires. Tossing it aside, he comes over to where Loki is laying.

“Loki-”

Loki scrambles backwards, clutching the blanket to his chest. “Get away from me!”

“Loki,” Thor says urgently. “Listen to me-”

“Mamma is *dead*,” Loki spits. “You *burned her alive* - you helped them do it - you lit the pyre - you *murderer*-”

“The electric fence is down,” Thor tells him. The intensity in his eyes is very *Red*. “The storm has knocked it out between towers six and seven. We have to go. *Now*.”

Loki suddenly forgets to breathe. “....Now?”

“This is it. This is our chance. We will never have another opportunity like this. Not before I’m too far gone. I can’t get you out of here any other way. We have to climb the fence.” Thor’s face cracks into a broken looking, desperate plea. “Look - I’m sorry about Mamma. I’m so sorry. I knew what I was doing but I did it anyway. But she told us that when it was time to go, we *go*. That time is now. *This is what she was talking about*. Will you come?”

"What about the guard towers?"

It’s then that Loki notices the assault rifle still strapped to Thor’s back. The one Loki had asked Thor to use to end his life. Loki knows at once why Thor is still armed with it. He can see it in Thor’s face.

“What about the *ocean*?!”

“We’ll have to swim.”

“Swim?! I don’t know how to *swim*! If I don’t drown I’ll freeze!”

“Hijacking a boat out of the harbour is out of the question. They’ll all be locked down for the storm.”

“Thor, I don’t know -” Loki whimpers. “It’s too much-”

“There’s no telling when the fence will be back up. It’s now or never.” Thor takes Loki’s hand in his. His skin is freezing cold. “Please. Please. I know it’s crazy. I know you have no reason to trust me right now. But I think I could get us out of here. I think I could get us out to the Rig.” Thor’s voice breaks. “If we don’t do this, I’m gonna end up doing far worse things than what you saw tonight. Far worse things than you could possibly imagine. I don’t want that. I want to be good. I want to be happy. I want *us* to be happy.” His eyes glisten. “Please, Loki. Will you come?”

Loki envisions the future that awaits him here. He thinks of how he’d been ready - even desperate - to end his life mere hours ago. He has nothing left to lose.

“If I could get us a boat,” Loki says, “Would you let me try?”

Thor engulfs him in his arms. He’s so relieved he doesn’t even ask Loki to elaborate.

“If we go we can never come back, do you understand?” Thor says, pulling back and cupping Loki’s face. “And I don’t mean back here, to the Compound. I mean this world. This *universe*. This story. We’re going to leave it all behind. Everything. The life you’ve always known, everyone you’ve met - it’ll all be gone. Undone. Reversed. It’ll be like none of this has ever happened.”

Loki closes his eyes and breathes deeply.

“Good,” he murmurs.

Chapter End Notes

All I want in life is to know that people enjoyed my work. So please leave a comment!
I always reply, although it may take me a few days to respond :)

my twitter is @teresalifts

Chapter Notes

Daylight
In bad dreams
In a cool world
Full of cruel things
Hang tight
All you
Nothing like a big bad bridge
To go burnin' through

[-Acid Rain, Lorn](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Come with a boat. Bring your boat. The roads are shit, you won't make it through any other way. Please. Black's gonna send me to the Rig if you don't, he hates me. Please come. Red is scaring me. I'm scared. I'm gonna climb the fence with or without you. Please, Daddy. Please come....”

It's strange to hear Loki speak like that. So childlike, and yet simultaneously so sexual, even when his voice is as raw and as hoarse as it is. It's the way he begs - as if to suggest that there would be equal pleasure in granting him his request, or in callously denying him. God, he can beg. On his knees, eyes shining, pleading for the release only a bullet can provide....

Loki hangs up the phone. His jaw clenches; his cheeks are flushed pink with blood. He keeps his gaze fixed straight ahead at the wall.

“He's coming. He says he'll be down in the bay by sunrise.”

Thor snaps to awareness. He realizes he'd been staring.

"You think this guy'll show?" Thor says.

“I suppose we'll find out,” Loki says, then looks at him oddly. “Are you-”

“Fine. Yes. But we need to hurry.”

The two of them gather all the blankets in their house. Loki dresses himself in his outerwear: coat, mitts, boots. They sling their blankets over their shoulders.

“I have to say goodbye to Sigryn,” Loki says.

Thor nods. Good - that'll give him time to take care of the watchtowers without Loki around to interfere.

“I'll meet you at the base of tower six in fifteen minutes,” Thor says.

Loki scrubs a hand over his face. "Okay. Christ - okay."

Thor leans in for a parting kiss, but Loki turns his head at the last minute to dodge it.

"I really can't kiss you right now," Loki says through clenched teeth.

He's still sore about that woman. Thor swallows back a flare of annoyance. Hadn't he already apologized for that? And anyway, it's not like Thor can really refrain from doing the things that he does. If only Loki knew - just how much - Thor is trying - to keep himself on task -

"Thor." Loki's sharp voice cuts through the fog.

"Right," Thor mumbles, suddenly confused.

The two of them exit the cabin for the last time. Loki bolts off in the direction of Sigryn's cabin without another word. It's early in the morning - nearly six a.m. - but it's as black as the darkest night. Thor pauses to gaze up at the overcast sky. It's still snowing wetly, although the storm seems to be abating. Strange, that. Such an unnatural storm for this time of year. Usually it's still much too cold for this kind of heavy, wet snow. And it's the wet snow that tends to take down the fence - something to do with the weight of it.

The woman's pyre is still smouldering out in the Compound yard. Thor passes it by and feels nothing, nothing.

When Thor reaches tower six, he sets down the blankets he'd brought with him and climbs the spiral staircase up to the observation deck. The soldiers therein stand at attention when Thor enters.

"Red sir," they salute, surprised to see him here at this hour. Some of them look so young. Little more than kids. Kids Thor has known for years. They would be so achingly easy to destroy.

"I'm going to climb the fence," Thor tells them instead. "Me and Loki. I think the power's out between this tower and tower seven."

The soldiers look at each other.

"I'm asking you not to shoot us down," says Thor, "But if you feel like you must, shoot me. I deserve it. But please, let Loki go."

The soldiers eye him curiously. "Commander Red?"

Thor shakes his head. "My name is...."

RED

"My name is...."

REDREDREDREDRED

"My name is....Thor Odinson." Thor heaves out the words. It's the Tar wanting to come up instead. "That's my name. That's my name. That's my name."

It feels unfinished to leave them here alive. Why is Thor sparing them? What would it matter if he terminated them? Who would care? Not the readers - these soldiers do not even have names. These men are here because they should be, because this setting demands it. And they are in Thor's way.

Wait. Thor remembers why. He must spare them not for their sake, but for his own.

Thor backs away slowly, feeling disoriented. He forces himself to descend the stairs and to exit the tower. He picks up his discarded blankets and slings them back over his shoulder, mindful of the rifle still strapped to his back. As he waits for Loki to show, Thor reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a crumpled piece of notepaper. On it is the message Loki had transcribed, the message he'd gotten from some unknown insider source. It's directions, Thor thinks, to the point at which their timelines diverged. Thor reads it over for what must be the thousandth time. Although Thor couldn't say for certain what the message means, it somehow makes sense to him. She will know what to do with it.

Loki arrives some minutes later. He looks like he'd been crying. He's still crying. It's distracting, but Thor knows better than to say so.

"It's taken care of," Thor tells him.

Loki sobs shakily. He does not ask Thor to elaborate, which is good. It is best that Loki does not know Thor has left those men alive.

Thor takes him by the shoulders. "If something happens to me, I want you to keep going. Find a way out of here. Get back to civilization. Live your life. Promise me. You have to keep going."

Loki only exhales wetly.

"Promise me," Thor demands, rattling him.

"I promise," Loki says.

Thor nods and releases him. "I'll go first."

"No. I'll go first," says Loki. "I'll chicken out if I go second."

Loki looks straight up to the top of the chainlink fence and swallows. He's daunted. For a moment Thor thinks Loki won't do it of his own volition, and Thor considers drawing his rifle to coax him. But then Loki laces his gloved fingers through the chainlinks and begins to make the climb.

In the distance, Thor can make out Sigryn standing underneath one of the yard's floodlights, watching them and crying. Thor does not go over to her. What is there to say? It should all be undone soon enough.

As Thor follows Loki up the fence, he finds himself unconcerned as to whether or not the soldiers in the watchtower shoot him down. Thor's been shot before. Many times in fact. He's even died, some of the times. And each time he's resurrected, the Tar grows in just a little thicker.

As they ascend, no shots are fired.

Rather, the soldiers are watching. Watching to see what's going to happen.

Loki reaches the top first. He hovers one hand over the electrified cables for a few seconds before he finally lays his hand on them.

And - nothing.

"The fence is down!" Thor hears Sigryn screech from far below. "The soldiers aren't shooting! The fence is down!"

Thor reaches the top some moments later. With their free hands, they heft the blankets they'd

brought with them over the rings of barbed wire. Loki very, very carefully climbs over the top of the fence, spooked by the height, or by the fear of being shot down, or just by what they're setting out to do. He makes it over and descends easily enough, although he loses his grip some three-quarters of the way down and lands on the ground below with an *oomph*.

As Thor likewise reaches the other side, a few of the soldiers from the watchtower are beginning to make the climb for themselves, having abandoned their posts. So are some of the morning labourers who'd been observing the goings-on. They're taking this opportunity to escape for themselves while they can, while there is no one there to stop them. Order in the Compound always was a precarious thing.

But there's no time to stand around and gawk; Black will be on their heels. He has dogs, all-terrain vehicles, helicopters. Thor has already decided that he will shoot Loki before Loki could fall back into Black's hands. It would be a waste for Loki's life to end in such a pedestrian way, so Thor grabs Loki's hand and makes him sprint.

They run across the barren, snowy landscape until Loki literally keels over, panting heavily with exhaustion. Thor does not feel tired. He does not even feel out of breath. Loki's feebleness is irritating to him.

As he waits for Loki to recuperate, Thor peers back in the direction from whence they came. He detects faint gunshots in the far distance emanating from the Compound. Their escape has triggered unrest. The Compound is boiling over after having been under so much pressure for so long. Like a line of dominoes increasing in size, their one small action has triggered consequences beyond their reckoning.

Thor cannot dwell on this. He can only move forwards.

Thor can smell Loki's fear, rich and pungent and alluring, as Loki continues to pant out clouds of warm humid breath. Thor is likewise attuned to the rabbit-like pace of Loki's heart, which is frenetically pumping adrenaline through his system. How erotic it would be, to have Loki for the first time under these circumstances, when they're both on the cusp of encountering something so cosmic, so beyond comprehension. The pinnacle of human carnal experience. Terror and ecstasy. Terror and ecstasy.

Thor crouches down, holding his head in his hands.

"Can you talk to me for a minute?"

Loki's voice is wheezy. "Talk to you?"

"The sound of your voice helps me focus. I need to focus for a minute."

"Uh - okay," says Loki breathlessly. "Um - what should I talk to you about?"

Thor squeezes his eyes shut and fists his own hair until it hurts - not that pain means anything to him anymore.

"Not something stressful. Nothing about...any of this. Please. Just for a minute."

"Okay..." Loki says again. He clears his throat. "Well, there's this story. About two princes....brothers actually. The elder brother was a warrior. The younger one was a sorcerer. And they lived in a golden city in the sky...."

The story feels familiar - like Thor's heard it before. Loki's voice is grounding. Thor feels calmer.

“Where’d you hear that?” he asks, once Loki has stopped talking.

“From Mamma,” Loki says thickly. He wipes tears off his face. “Mamma told it to me.”

“How does the story end?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Why’d you start telling it to me if you didn’t know the ending?”

“It’s the only thing I could think of! Sorry if I’m a little frazzled right now!”

“Don’t. Yell at me,” warns Thor, and Loki wisely snaps his mouth shut.

Loki looks down at his hand. He’s been clutching something. It looks like a compass on a chain.

“Did you even stop to think about what you were doing?” Loki says quietly, after a beat. “When you lit the pyre?”

“I had to.”

“You *had* to? *Why?*”

“So she could bestow us with the storm.” Thor gets to his feet. “Black will be coming after us. We have to keep moving.”

Loki digs in his heels. “Wait - no. Wait. What?”

Thor makes him run anyway. By the time they reach the rocky cliff overlooking the bay, the morning light is beginning to crest in the east. The storm has eased to a light mist, even a drizzle. Thor guides Loki down the precarious path until they reach the shore below.

The beach is nothing but jagged, bare boulders and rocks. No plants grow - not even lichen or coastal grass. There are no birds in the sky. No fish in the water, no crabs in the coarse, abrasive sand. It is as sterile as a surgeon’s scalpel. There isn’t even much snow here, nor any ice floes out in the water. The sea here never freezes over, even in the depths of the coldest winters. The water just gets colder and colder and colder. A faint staticy buzz surrounds them, like the hum of fluorescent lights. The air both smells and tastes metallic. This is the end of the world as Thor knows it - the boundary between what exists and what does not exist.

THE_RIG is looming on the horizon, holding its breath, waiting for them. It knows what they’re planning to do. Thor doesn’t fear it, though. Not like he used to. In fact, he finds himself drawn to it. He only hopes that she’s managed to last out there. Because if she hasn’t, all of this will be for nothing.

Thor cannot think about that. He must move forwards.

“If this Duntsch guy doesn’t show, we’re swimming,” he tells Loki.

“He’ll show,” says Loki.

“You’re sure?”

Loki gazes out at the ocean. His voice is soft, almost contemplative. “Men like that - they do dumb shit when they think they’re gonna get laid.”

Thor seethes inwardly. "Is he the one you slept with at the Big House?"

Loki looks at him. "You're *really* gonna care about that right now."

Sometimes, Loki really does piss him off. Denying Thor a fucking kiss as if he hadn't been whoring himself out behind Thor's back. It makes Thor wonder how Loki got his black eye, or his split lip, or the bruises around his neck. Thor wonders if he's the one who did it, and if it felt good to do.

"You need to hide," Loki tells him, shoving him in the shoulder. "*Thor*. Go hide."

Thor stares him down. Loki stares back, his head tilted up, defiant.

"Thor," Loki says again, this time with an upwards inflection.

Thor forces himself to back down. He retreats behind a large boulder and crouches behind it. As he waits, he realizes his hands had been clenched into fists, such that his nails had left indentations in his palms.

"He's coming," Thor hears Loki call some time later, although Thor had long sensed the boat approaching. Thor keeps himself out of sight behind the boulder. He needs this man to beach his boat, and it's unlikely he would do so if he saw Thor there. Thor only peers out from behind the boulder once he hears the man turn off the boat's engine and disembark.

Dr. Duntsch is a dumpy looking older man in a fisherman's hat and yellow slicker. He embraces Loki and kisses Loki right on the lips, which Loki allows. He cradles Loki's battered face and speaks soothing words of comfort to him. And Thor is overcome with bright, incandescent rage. He hears his fury in his voice when he bursts out from behind the boulder, rifle aimed, and barks at the man to put his hands in the air.

The man nearly jumps out of his slicker. He springs away from Loki like he'd been shocked.

"Oh, Jesus. Oh Christ. Commander Red, I presume?"

Loki looks almost equally frightened; he's never heard Thor speak in that voice before. Nonetheless, Loki scrambles out of the man's vicinity and comes to stand next to Thor, although he gives Thor a wide berth.

"So it was a trap then," the man says, numb, arms still up, though they droop somewhat. "I should've known."

"We need your boat," Loki tells him. "I'm sorry."

"To do what? Head south by sea? Black'll have you apprehended before he even has breakfast!"

"We're not running," Loki says. "We're going to the Rig."

"What? Loki, *why*?"

"We're going to fix this," Loki says firmly. "We're going to undo this timeline and start over."

"You're fools, both of you," spits Duntsch. "The Rig will consume you before you'll ever get near it!"

"Shall I kill him?" asks Thor, still aiming his rifle.

"Wait," says Loki. He goes up to Duntsch, though he is careful to stay out of Thor's line of fire. "I

want you to tell me what he was. Tell me what you were doing with him in that godforsaken laboratory.”

Duntsch smiles, as if to himself. He lowers his hands, and a wistful, almost ironic expression crosses his face.

"Ah. Mooncalf. He loved stories, didn't he? And he loved love stories most of all."

Loki's voice is shrill. "What does that have to do with anything?!"

"Why, everything, Loki," Duntsch says, as if he can't fathom why Loki would even ask. "We grew all our Mooncalves on stories - the harvested stories of each and every conscript. Until finally we produced a Mooncalf that could see beyond the Veil...."

Thor takes this in. Yes. That makes sense. *The Veil*. He's seen beyond it too. He's seen what he is: A character, trapped in a story. And the main character, at that. He was never meant to realize it; nor was the story meant to go in this direction. There is no point in hiding text anymore. This is the end, the final chapter, and it no longer matters.

"But the real power is not merely seeing what's beyond," Duntsch goes on. "Ultimate power....is the power to rewrite the story. To wrest control for ourselves. To author the world as we see fit."

Loki is hysterical. "What d'you mean, *veil*? What're you *talking* about!? You better fucking explain, or I'll have him blow your brains out!"

"He might as well do it then. I'm as good as dead anyway, after this. Oh, I'm a fool, I'm a fool. Do you mind." Duntsch plunks himself on a nearby rock, pulls out a flask from inside his raincoat, unscrews it and takes a swig from it. "I love you as you are, you know. He only wants you as you once were. Unused. Untouched. If he saw you the way I have, he wouldn't be doing this. I know who you really are. I want you anyway. I am a fool."

"You don't love me," Loki bites back. "You don't fucking know me!"

"I bet I know you better than he does. Did you even tell him about Sunny Day?"

Sunny Day. The name sounds familiar to Thor.

"It doesn't matter," Loki grits out. "We're going to undo it. Nothing about the past is going to matter."

"You didn't, did you," deduces Duntsch flatly. "Is it because you're ashamed? Are you afraid he'll be disgusted, that he won't love you as you love him if he knew the truth?"

"I'm not the one who's disgusting. *You* are. You're sick, d'you know that? Promising me my mother in exchange for being your sex doll? Do you realize how *fucked up* that sounds?!"

Duntsch opens his hands. "I didn't mean for it to come across that way. Truly I didn't. I only offered because I thought it would make you happy. I would've had us live as a family."

"A family," Loki echoes, incredulous. "A family. That's not what a *family* is. That's two prostitutes shackled up with their john!"

"And how is that any different from the family you had when you and Red were children?" Duntsch counters tiredly. "Your mother grew to love his father, did she not? I think you could have loved me back, if you were only open to it. But no. Nothing I could offer could turn you from your

heart's true desire. I see that now."

Loki holds out his hand. "Give me the boat keys."

Duntsch retrieves his keys from his pocket, but instead of handing them to Loki, he tosses them as far as he can out into the icy black sea water.

"What the *fuck!*" exclaims Loki.

"I'm trying to help you, Loki. You cannot trust this *thing*. Look at him. He's barely holding himself together. He's luring you out there to destroy you. The Rig will shred you apart!"

Thor hands Loki his assault rifle. Loki takes it, too surprised to do anything else, and holds it with the kind of wide-eyed bewilderment one would expect from an untrained civilian.

"Keep it on him," Thor gestures at Duntsch. "Shoot him, if you like. I will retrieve the keys."

Thor begins unlacing his boots. He strips himself of his scarf, coat, his sweater, his shirt, his socks. He wades into the ocean and dives underneath the water. He notes that the water is extremely cold, unnaturally so, but it does not bother him. No, mostly what he feels is **its** murky presence diffused all around him. There is no sea life here. No fish, no seaweed. Nor is there any evidence that there ever was. No organic material can survive here long. Thankfully, Thor is not burdened by such fleshy weakness. It is good that they will have a boat, as Loki will surely perish making the swim.

Thor emerges from beneath the water some twenty minutes later, keys in hand. Loki is staring at him, mouth open and eyes wide.

"Oh my *god*," Loki says.

Thor looks down. His skin is bluish-white from hypothermia and perhaps oxygen deprivation. The Tar is churning inside him, rendering the veins in his wrists black. But Thor feels alive, vital. Even sensual.

"You see!?" the doctor screeches, pointing at Thor. "You see? The fetid Rig-water has roused his Tar. He's *rife* with it - more Tar than man. Loki, listen to me. I understand that you feel compelled to go with him. I know you love him very much. But this is not your brother. You must shoot him. Empty the entire clip into him. Bring him down!"

"You're a liar," Loki shouts back, although there's a waver in his voice. "You've tried to sabotage me before. You want him out of the way so I'll have no choice but to go with you!"

"Your brother is gone, Loki. Look at him. He's an abomination. *You must shoot him!*"

Thor is indifferent as to whether or not he is shot, but he finds this feckless little man loathsome. Thor selects a hefty beach-rock and takes it in-hand. The man scrambles away, but Thor is much stronger, much faster, and he catches up with him in only a few bounds. Thor brings the rock down right onto the man's head, crushing his skull and dropping him to the ground. Thor picks up the rock and does it again, and again, relishing the way the man's brains squelch out with each successive strike. So much knowledge contained in such a contemptible hunk of meat; so easily eradicated. Thor does not stop until the man's head is an unrecognizable mass of gooey mangled flesh. His blood oozes in the lapping waves and curdles in the water like vinegar in milk.

Thor straightens and turns around. Loki is cowering behind Thor's rifle like a mouse, shuddering with cold and fear.

“Don’t come any closer,” Loki barks. “I mean it. Stand back.”

Thor stalks towards him and in one swift precise motion disarms him. Loki is so pathetically slow, so weak. Thor bends the rifle in two over his knee like a toy and tosses it aside.

Loki staggers backwards. He swallows thickly; this makes Thor notice his creamy, bruised throat.

“There is no way but forwards,” Thor tells him. “I must blindfold you.”

“Okay,” says Loki, little more than a whimper. “Wait - okay.”

Thor takes the scarf he’d discarded and blindfolds those beautiful teary eyes that will never see again. Green, like sea glass. Thor ties the double knot securely at the back of Loki’s head, and is pleased when Loki keeps still and allows it.

“Do not remove this under any circumstance. Do you understand?”

Loki nods. A pretty wet sob escapes him. His lips are bitten-red from the cold; his breath comes out in rapid cloudy pants. Thor is aroused by his fear, his submission, his literal blind trust. A heady cocktail of emotion from one who knows he is facing imminent annihilation. Terror and ecstasy, terror and ecstasy.

Thor presses his thumb to Loki’s lower lip to feel Loki’s life-giving and numbered breaths against his skin. This makes him recall the way Loki had so aptly pleased him using this orifice. Loki’s lips are cold, but the inside of his mouth is warm and lush and yielding.

“I was thinking about that story,” Loki suddenly says against Thor’s thumb, still blindfolded, his voice shrill and panicked. “And I think I remember how it ends now. Yeah. I think the princes, I think the princes end up together. Even when one falls away and is lost, he is found by the other. And brought back. No matter how many times that it takes. They have to end up together. They love each other. That’s their happy ending.” His voice hitches, and his teeth chatter. “Thor? I want my happy ending too.”

Thor blinks, confused. Yes - that reminds him - their story is not yet over. Thor has to complete it before he can try again.

“Yes,” Thor says at last, removing his thumb. “I will guide you.”

“Wait -” Loki’s voice has raised even higher in pitch, “I’ll go, I’m not saying I won’t, but it would help me if you could - if you could assure me that you’re Thor...?”

“Thor is not the one you need to get you out there,” Thor tells him.

Loki starts to hyperventilate. His breath is wheezy.

“Can you do one last thing for me then, whoever you are? Can you tell me you love me? You don’t have to mean it. I only want to hear it said in your voice. Just once.”

Thor feels nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. No pity, no remorse, no compassion, no fear. Certainly not love. All Thor feels is a compulsion to see this process through to its natural conclusion, whatever that might be.

And yet, at the same time, Thor knows, intellectually, that he does love Loki. He loves him more than anything. That’s why he is doing this; that’s the point of this story. The ones reading this are no doubt desperate to hear him say it, but they, like Loki, will have to wait.

"I will say it when I can mean it," says Thor. "That time is not now."

Loki's flesh is very soft and very supple. Thor takes extra care not to crush him. Loki flows under Thor's hands, easy to manipulate, like wet clay. Malleable. He doesn't try to run. He couldn't get away if he tried. Thor is a predator unlike any other. Unlike anything the world has ever seen.

[illegible]

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into 日本語 available:[THE RIG \(Japanese Translation\)](#) by [Sarah Translator](#) I love loki whump, fight me. TW: violence, references to child abuse, suicide and past sexual/emotional abuse. Apologies for errors, I am unbeta'd. *** PREFACE:Thor bolts awake. In bed. In the Compound. “No,” he sobs. Disorientated, he springs out of bed and rushes to his calendar in the kitchen. September, 1996. Jane’s already been taken to THE_RIG. Thor has not yet escaped to find Loki. Thor is back where he started in the story, and yet not far back enough. He has to do it all again. He has to find a way out of here. He has to save Loki. Despite how hard Thor tries to hold on to the memory, it disintegrates, like a rapidly fading dream. He

can't remember, he can't remember.... *** ** CHAPTER_ONE:oneofnine: Thor's toes
are freezing he can't stop checking his watch: almost an hour and a half delay. He shuffles
his weight from one foot to the other as he puffs on his cigarette. He knows they're on route,
but there's no telling when they'll arrive - not in this weather. Thor hopes it's soon. The guys
are tired, and cold. It's late, and slushy puddles are starting to form in the tarmac's potholes.
There's only so much freezing rain their outerwear can repel before it
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is having a nightmare. THE_RIG is alive and moving towards shore like a spider, with each
of its legs rising up out of the ocean in turn. Its smokestacks curl backwards, revealing a
great gaping void like maw. It is hungry, always hungry. Insatiable. Out of its mouth comes
a deep, rumbling, like, TEN THOUSAND VOICES MOANING IN TUNISON.
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ιlzMzdq↯j vEXιxvxLQ n əΛvX6eQ x— x\$ \$qi 9%ειN I Λzqaz6 ɁƆ Hldə >>> It's all
coming back to him now. 7%\$ Oz5if yMBWD r1zWzpB4f AEXtxAx7Q UeY AX9aQ KT KS
\$Bi6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& BkE32E C&%OH7DbZo uAdwU5Pp
yIseIs cNM 4plgz 0zVUx eCpYRt ELakZYLI9zjkybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY0
oUvoeUMKPF p3Ffs8iJh r Ams 458Th€@ yvTae Oz5if gWD r1zWzpB 4f AEXtxAx7Q
UeYAX9aQ KT KS \$B i6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& BkE32E C&%O
H7DbZo uAdwU 5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz 0zVUx eCpYRt ELakZYLI9zjkybH6 AiXP CeN2m
7mǻrPY0 oUvoeU MKPF p3Ffs8 iJh >>> Thor always fucks up the story, one way or
another xAx7Q UeYAX9aQ KT KS \$Bi 6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm
9j1Kxli dITxHhxzxtU a5akfA 6#ǻ\$@%rG yvTgj5e Oz5if yMMBWΔD r1zWzp B4f AEXt Q
LxvxιXΕv j↯qdzMzlι heƒkalg he7r 235x7Q UeYAX9aQ KT KS \$Bi6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C
H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& Bk E32EC& %OH7 DbZo uAd wU5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz
0zVUx eCpYRt ELakZYLI9zjkybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY0 oUvo eUMKPF p3F fs8iJh
>>> He and Loki always wind up back here, on >>> THE_RIG >>> j1Kxli dITx
HhxzxtU a5akfA 6#\$@%rG Agkms 0Thy vTae Oz5if yM MBWD r1zWzp B4f AEXtxAx7 Q
UeY AX9aQ KT KS \$Bi6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& BkE32EC&

%OH 7DbZo uAdwU5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz 0zVUx eCpYRtΨ ELakZYLI9zjkybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY0 >>> Back to try again ɁzΛqzΛ I NɁE%9iq\$ SɁ └Ɂ Qe6XvΛə Ɂ Q ʌ xryxvɁX Ɂv jʌqdzMzlɁ pMqWWΛ jɁ zOφ əe└ΛɁq└suv ɁɁ%@\$#9 vɁɁe e Ɂ ɁxxɁqHx└IplɁvexɁlr6 wɁɁdlH ɔ6 ɁzΛqzΛ I NɁE%9 āw̃iq\$ SɁ └Ɂ Qe6XvΛə Ɂ QʌxvɁ ihgf57 XɁv jʌqdzMzlɁ pMqWWΛ jɁ zO əe└ΛɁq└suv ɁɁ%@\$#9 vɁɁe e Ɂ ɁxxɁqHx└IplɁxɔNɔIH ɁMɁΛv mɁEQj └HɁI IɁqX dɁsqZq >>> To try and break free from the cycle they've been trapped in ʌ WD r1zWzpB4f AEXtx Ax7 Q UeYvAX9aQ KT KS \$Bi 6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm 9j1Kxli dITxH hxz xtU a5akfA 6#\$@%rm hyv Tjvcae O z5if yMBWD r1zWzp B4f 5argev hj hd yiii67gx btxAx7 cvhhsf huuQ UeYAX9 KT S \$Bi hjko83r I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& Bk E32EC& %O H7D bZo uAdwU5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz 0zVUx eCpYRt ELakZYLI9zjkybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY >>> To undo the story and set it back on its correct path ^4%^cw Leqi1QmvT P FC5uPy L5Q06fw└Ɂ Q a5akf A 6#\$ @%rG vTe Oz5if BxqHx└IplɁxɁlr6 wɁɁdlH ɔ6 ɁzΛqzΛ I NɁE%9 iq\$ SɁ └Ɂ Qe6XvΛə Ɂ ʌxvɁXɁv jʌqdzMzlɁ eun5 E mC RZrr xjFL Y1vM p>>> And finally achieve their happy ending 7fm 5kCb m3K 55Gg Hq9zbAJ1peE mhDLtn 3M8ae kYBk E32E CAŌŸŸe6XvΛə Ɂ xɁXɁv jɁqdz5MzlɁ pM qWWΛ WD r1zWzpB4f AEXtxAx7Q UeFLgvt r6kR T 488j 1F0vdc uK4l BZbsKpXBGi mEep1H C9 GzvhyZ I Nr3%6 iB\$ SK TK Qa9XAYeU Q7xAxtX kthEA 4Bp46b zWz1r DW ʌWWqMp ɁlzMzdqʌj vEXɁxv xʌ Q Ɂ ɁΛvX6eAY eU tXEA f4BpzWz 1r Dhuiif f5 ʌWWqMp ɁlzMzdqʌj vEXOH7DbZ ouAdwU 5Ppy IseIs cNM4p lgz0zV UxeC pYRtELak ZYL I9zjkybH6Ai XP CeN 2mhm \mrP Y0oUvo eUMKPFp 3 Fv >>> This time it'll be different rG sTh3435% yvTae Oz5if yMMB ΣWD r1zWz pB4f AEXt xAx7Q UeY AX9aQ KT KS \$Bi6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& BkE32EC & %OH7 DbZo uAdwU5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz 0zVUx e CpYRt ELakZYLI9zjk ybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY0 oUvoe UMKPF p3F fs8iJh >>> This time they have directions ʌ WD r1zWkzpB4f AE XtxAx7Q UeYA X9aQ KT KS \$Bi 6β%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEm 9j1K xlidITxHāhxz xtU a5akfA Ɂ6#\$@%rG Aph hkðæ3yvTae Oz5iWD r1zW zpB4f AEXtxAx7Q UeYAX9aQ KT KS \$Bi6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1p eEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& BkE 32EC&%O H7D bZo uAdwU5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz 0zVUx eCpYRt ELakZY LI9zjkybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY >>> And Thor knows now that he must remember 7\$rsTkh gjy4vTae Oz5D r1zWzpB4f A EXytx Ax7Q UeYA X9a5ug Q KT KS \$Bi6% fhgvds 3rN I YzhvzG 9Oz5if yMMB WD r1zWzpB4f AEXtxAx7Q UeYAX9aQ KTKS \$Bi6%3rN I Yzhvz XPCeN2m hmm rPY0oUv oeU MKPFp3 Ffs8iJR h BFv&7Ĉ6\$ └Ɂ Qe6XvΛə Ɂ Qʌ 4 xv5 xɁXɁv jʌqdzMzlɁ pMqWWΛ WD r1zWzpYB4f AEXtmxAx 7Q UeY 9aQ KT KS \$Bi 6%3rN I YzhvzG 9C H1peEem 9j1KxlidI TxH hxz xt U a5akfA 6 #@\$@%rG Ae Oz5if D r1zWzpB4f >>> He needs to remember. C H1peEm hDLtn3 M8aekY*& BkE3 2EC&% OH7DbZo uAdwU5Pp yIseIscNM 4plgz 0zVUx eCpYR t ELak ZYLI9zjk ybH6 AiXP CeN2m 7mrPY0 oUvoeUM ŦKPFē pyvTae Oz 5iugf etr87we689r6q r1zWĜzpB4f AEXt xAx7Q UeYAP1n 11lksv Yigah325K 96lD47 k96M1L UebkCq pm9 04dRwh BAEW rJy9ElĚ eV me ycwL eqi1Q mɁΔvTPk6rtvgLFV SU&B PZ7w M4P9j1K xlidITxHh xzxtU a5akfA 6#\$@%rc wLeq i1Qmv TPFC5u GgHq9zbA J1peEmñ! hDLtn3 M8aekY BkEă32E COH 7DbZo uA dwU5PpyIs eG e YTc3CyQe6 XvşΛə Ɂ Qʌxv xɁXɁv jʌqdzMzlɁ pMqWĝHWΛ jɁ zO əe└ΛɁq└suv ɁɁ%@\$#9 vɁɁe e Ɂ ɁxxɁqHx└IʌjQɁbm vΛɁMɁ HlɔNɔx lāpI└xHq xzxɁ Ɂ e ɁɁɁ 9#\$ @%ɁɁ vɁus└q ʌΛ└eə Oz Ɂ ʌWWqxqHxĥTlɁdɁlxɁ1Ɂ9 wɁɁp1H O9 GMBxqHx└IplɁxɁlr6 wɁɁdlH ɔ6 ɁzΛqzΛ I NɁE%9 iq\$ pɁlxɁlr6 wɁɁdlH ɔ6 ɁzΛqzΛ I NɁE%9 iq\$ SɁ └Ɂ QvΛəfhfjf53 Ɂ Qʌxv xɁXɁv jʌqdzMzlɁ pMqXU2rtd z67ŦEwrcUO OZS W F th86qr8in. rcwLeqi1Q mŖvTP FC5u zΛqzY I NɁE%6 Ɂb\$ S Qe9XAYəU Q7

[illegible]

You should never have met me.

That's why I am here.

That's why I always end up here.

You continue to fail to break the cycle.

This time you and I won't ever meet.

You'll be free of this story.

You'll be free of this fate.

You'll be free of me.

How can you know that.

I have directions.
To the correct point in the past.
Far enough back to stop this from ever happening again.

So you have.

Can you get us there.

I believe so.
I will begin to reverse the story now.
Do not fail this time.
The cycle must be broken.
You must remember.

I will remember.

May we never cross paths.

May we never cross paths.

.shtap ssorc reven ew yaM

.rebmemer lliw I

.rebmemer tsum uoY
.nekorb eb tsum elcyc ehT
.emit siht liaf ton oD
.sdrawkcab yrots eht tes lliw I
.os eveileb I

.ereht su teg uoy naC

.evah uoy oS

.niaga gnineppah morf siht pots ot kcab hguone raF
.tsap eht ni tniop tcerroc eht oT
.snoitcerid evah I

.taht wonk uoy nac woH

.em fo eerf eb ll'uoY
.etaf siht fo eerf eb ll'uoY
.yrots siht fo eerf eb ll'uoY
.teem reve t'now I dna uoy emit siht
.emit siht thgir ti teg ll'I

.elcyc eht kaerb ot liaf ot eunitnoc uoY
.ereh pu dne syawla I yhw s'tahT
.ereh ma I yhw s'tahT
.wonk I

.em tem evah reven dluohs uoY

.rohT si eman yM

[illegible]

Chapter End Notes

Thor veers off the side of the road and crashes into a lamppost. His head slams into the airbags, rendering him briefly unconscious.

When he comes-to, Thor careens out of the smoking wreck. The car that he'd worked for an entire year on has been totalled. Thor should care about this, but finds that he doesn't. He looks down at his hands - no knuckle tattoos. He runs his tongue over his teeth. All there.

He curls over and throws up the dinner he'd eaten some hours before. Tacos. He'd had tacos.

"Hey kid, are you ok?"

It's some stranger who'd pulled over to the scene of the accident.

"Do you have a pen," Thor croaks.

"What?"

"A pen, a pen. I need a pen."

Bewildered, the stranger hands him one from his breast pocket. Thor snatches it, pulls out a paper napkin from the taco place from his pocket, crouches down, and scribbles down the last fading bits of his memory.

The stranger peers over Thor's shoulder. "The rig? What's a rig? You need me to call an ambulance?"

Thor doesn't respond. He staggers off down the highway, back towards town. The streets are at once foreign, as if he had not been here in many years, and yet familiar like he never left.

It happened, it happened. Thor has to look down at his napkin to be sure.

The house - Thor starts to cry, seeing it again. He doesn't know why; hadn't he just left? Hadn't he just sworn he would never come back?

He opens the front door. The smell of it hits him like a sledgehammer. Home. He's finally home.

"Loki, I came back. I came back for you. Hey! Runt."

Loki is in the kitchen helping his mother clean the mess Thor and Odin had made during their big fight. He peers out from the kitchen doorway, eyes wide and red like he'd been crying. He's so small for a nine year old. He doesn't remember, he doesn't remember. Because there's nothing to remember. Nothing has happened yet.

And it won't. Not this time. Thor has remembered. And he isn't going to forget.

"I'm not going anywhere, Loki. I promise."

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